BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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WHAT SHE OVERHEARD

THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

A RASH EXPERIMENT

THE YOUNGEST MISS MOWBRAY

In Old Madras

:: :: *By B. M. Croker* :: ::

*"When you've 'eard the East a-calling
You never 'eed nought else."*

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IN OLD MADRAS

CHAPTER I

A HEAVY tropical surf boomed on the shingle, with the precision and monotony of minute guns, and a fierce clammy breeze raged from the sea, where Massulah boats and small shipping rocked uneasily. The same wind, circulating inland, drove whirling clouds of brick-red dust through Madras City, and vigorously swept the long Mount Road,—ere it died with a whisper, among distant paddy fields.

By ten o'clock on this detestable morning, all troops had returned to barracks, signallers and golfers deserted the Island, riding-parties were no longer abroad, but under languid punkahs, or tireless electric fans, the military, civil, and mercantile element were still actively engaged.

Among the latter, the wealthy house of Brown, Brown and Co. stood prominent as one of the oldest firms in India.

Established in the humble early days of John Company, it had acquired name and fame, expanded and flourished. Undisturbed by wars, unshaken by mutinies, or famine, its grim, hard-featured offices continued to frown upon the first line of beach. Possibly those storm-beaten walls, and gloomy flagged passages, had echoed to the voice and footsteps of a visitor from "Writer's Buildings"—the future hero of Arcot and Plassy, a junior clerk, named Robert Clive. Who knows?

At present, within the inhospitable waiting-room (a lofty slate-coloured apartment, with heavily barred windows), a well set-up young Englishman was unnecessarily pacing the worn cocoanut matting. His thin cashmere suit, and Panama hat, indicated the recent efforts of a London tailor to cope with a warm climate. The white-covered umbrella which he carried in his hand was also new—indeed, its owner himself was new to the country, having arrived the previous evening.

At the moment, the stranger was impatiently awaiting an interview with the acting representatives of Brown and Brown—but apparently these were in no hurry to receive him.

Meanwhile, in a spacious inner office, Mr. Fleming, a stout, sleek personage with a bald head and heavy face, had been handed a visiting-card by his partner Mr. Parr—a shrivelled little gentleman, known indifferently as "Monkey Parr," or "Old Nick," for Anglo-India delights in nicknames.

"Captain Mallender, Army and Navy Club," he read aloud, then staring hard at his companion, gave a low and distinctly unofficial whistle.

"Oh, yes," responded Mr. Parr, removing his pince-nez with a decisive click. "Same name, same club. I can tell you, that it gave *me* a nasty shock; but, of course, here is the heir, now his father is dead, come out to nose about, and make enquiries."

"He may enquire till he's blue—he will find that he has undertaken a fool's errand. Why can't the young ass leave well alone?" demanded Mr. Fleming testily.

"Because he doesn't believe things *are* well," sharply rejoined his partner.

"And intends to better them, eh? If he is not mighty careful, he will lose his half-loaf; and anyway it's a deuced nuisance; a very awkward business—we shall have the fellow in and out all day, bothering for information."

"Well, he won't get it!" declared Mr. Fleming. "Let's send for him, and see what he is like? Here, Parsons!" he shouted to a pallid clerk; "just ask the gentleman to step this way."

In less than two minutes, the said gentleman, alert, well-groomed, and self-possessed, was bowing to the firm.

"Very glad to see you, Captain Mallender," lied Mr. Parr, the more prominent of the partners. "Just arrived, find it rather sultry, eh?"

"Yes," agreed the caller in a pleasant manly voice, "it's a bit of a change from an English winter—can't say much for your climate!"

"Won't you take a chair?" suavely suggested Mr. Fleming. "I suppose you have come out with the usual battery of rifles, to shoot big game?"

"Shoot big game! No," replied Mallender, as he seated himself, placed his hat carefully beside him on the dusty matting, and then in a clear decided tone, promptly announced his mission. "The fact is, I'm here to make enquiries about my Uncle and namesake, an officer in the Blue Hussars, who disappeared mysteriously about thirty years ago, when camping up in Coorg."

Mr. Parr nodded gravely, and considered the speaker with a sharp appraising eye—a veritable rat's eye. His partner merely exhibited a detached and judicial attitude, as he twisted the visitor's card between his bleached, fat fingers.

"He was supposed to have been drowned in the Cauvery, or carried off by a tiger," continued the young man, "and after the family had put on mourning, and the step had gone in the regiment, he wrote to my father, to say that although dead to the world, he was still in the land of the living—I have this letter in my possession."

Here the speaker hesitated for a moment, and looked expectantly at his audience; but the representatives of the house of Brown and Brown maintained an unsympathetic and professional silence, only broken

by the ticking of a typewriter, and the creaking of a punkah.

"The letter," resumed Mallender, "stated that my Uncle would draw half his income through your firm, the other half would be paid to my father, as the price of his silence; and on condition that he made no attempt to trace his brother, or allowed it to be known that he was still alive. After considerable reluctance and delay, my father agreed. You follow me?"

"Oh, yes—we follow you," assented Mr. Fleming, with a bland calmness, almost feline in its composure.

"My father died two months ago; before the end, he told me of the existence of his brother and the source of the greater part of his income; he also spoke of his promise—a promise he deeply regretted. However, a pledge given before I was born has no hold on me. If my Uncle is alive, I am determined to find him, and speak to him face to face."

Having made this declaration, Captain Mallender paused, and leaning on the knob of his umbrella, gravely contemplated his companions.

"Ah, so that's your plan!" exclaimed Mr. Fleming, as he dabbed his forehead with a silk handkerchief—he suffered severely from heat.

"Have you seen my Uncle since he wrote that letter?" inquired Mallender.

"No. We have never seen him, and we cannot tell you anything about him," was the brusque and unsatisfactory reply.

"But I presume you know where he is to be found? You must have some address?"

"Which we are bound never to divulge; and in your case, my dear sir, is it not imprudent to risk the loss of four thousand a year—in fact, most of your income?"

Mr. Parr broke off dramatically, in order to allow the fact to soak into the mind of this good-looking lunatic.

"Possibly you may not be disturbed in the house or park," supplemented his partner, "but it is from sound

investments that the bulk of the money comes. Formerly, interest was higher, but securities fluctuate. We have done our best—yes, we have done our best."

Here Mr. Fleming folded his hands across his capacious cummerbund, and assumed an expression of benign satisfaction.

"Oh, your best, of course," quickly assented Mallender. "I did not come out here with an eye to *money*. What brought me to India was to find my Uncle," and his umbrella struck the matting with such a vigorous thump, that it raised a little puff of dust. "I have my own ideas. I've given this business a great deal of—er—consideration, and I don't mind telling you, I firmly believe my Uncle to be dead, and that some infernal scoundrel is impersonating him, and living on half his fortune. Our share was just a bribe to shut our mouths and stifle inquiries. Now," suddenly appealing to Mr. Parr, "what do you say?"

"Well, Captain Mallender," and he gave a laugh of ironical amusement, "if I must give an opinion, *I* say, that your idea would make a valuable plot for a sixpenny shocker, but that is all there is in it."

"There is everything in it," replied the young man forcibly. "By all accounts my Uncle was remarkable for his high spirits and energy, a keen soldier—but not attached to the East. *He* heard the *West* a-calling, and was always looking forward to returning home; his letters were full of it. I've read them myself. So I ask you why—if alive—he should cut adrift from all he cared for, and bury himself in a country that he loathed?"

"Yes, yes, I must admit there is something in what you say," conceded Mr. Parr. "He was a handsome, headstrong, young officer. I saw him once, in this very office, when I was a junior—but—but——" and he pursed up his thin purple lips, "things happen, changes take place in people's characters, as well as in their constitutions. We have all to reckon with the unexpected; at any rate, we have Captain Mallender's instructions, and in his handwriting."

"Ah, probably a forgery! By all accounts, a highly cultivated native art."

"There is no question of imposture," rejoined Mr. Parr emphatically.

"I am afraid I must differ with you. I believe there has been foul play, and I am determined to remain in India, till I have got to the bottom of this affair."

As the man of business listened to this announcement, his whole expression changed oddly, his withered face seemed to tighten—but in another second the look had faded.

"Can you give me any particulars?" resumed Mallender.

"Oh, yes, I can certainly do that," acquiesced Mr. Parr now, clearing his throat, and crossing a pair of startlingly thin legs. "The simple facts were these. Captain Mallender and two brother officers went on a shooting trip from Bangalore in the beginning of the hot weather, 1881. They worked up through Mysore, into Coorg; one morning shortly before their leave expired, Captain Mallender's tent was found to be empty—the bed had not been slept in, his belongings were scattered about, a novel and a half-written letter lay open beside his cigar-case. Apparently, he had gone for a stroll before turning in. They said he was a restless young fellow, always eager to be doing something: fishing, bathing, shooting, exploring, and twice as active as his comrades; it looked as if he had wandered out, on one of his erratic rambles, and come to an untimely end. Some thought, he had been drowned in the Cauvery, but his body was not recovered—and dead or alive, he was never seen again."

"No, of course not!" assented his nephew with significant emphasis.

"Such disappearances are not altogether unknown," supplemented Mr. Fleming, with an air of imparting instruction to juvenile ignorance. "Oriental life has an irresistible fascination for some natures; the glamour, the relief from convention and the tyranny

of the starched collar, the lure of attractive and voluptuous women, idleness, ease, luxury, *drugs!* I could tell you of an officer who went crazy about a beautiful Kashmeri, and actually abandoned his regiment and his nationality, in order to live as a native! Twice his friends came from England to fetch him home, and each time he escaped—even at the eleventh hour in Bombay, plunged into the bazaars, hid his identity, and was lost, in *every* sense!"

"I'll swear my Uncle wasn't that sort," protested Mallender. "He was a sportsman, and as hard as nails; a soft sleepy existence among divans and hukas, would never appeal to him. I am absolutely convinced, that he was decoyed out of his tent, and murdered; and as I've already told you, I do not intend to return home, till I have unravelled the mystery, and run the impostor to ground—to this I stick!" and once more he thumped his umbrella, and disturbed the dust of weeks.

"Then in that case, I'm afraid you will make a lifelong stay in India," rejoined Mr. Parr—smiling as one smiles at the absurd pretensions of a child.

"Perhaps so," assented the young man shortly; "I intend to see this affair through—and my time is now my own. I conclude that you feel bound not to assist me, or give me the name of the town where the letters are posted?"

"Oh, no objection, Captain Mallender, no objection whatever," Mr. Fleming responded with effusion; "the letters are posted in different places all over the country, within, say, a radius of four hundred miles. For instance, we may receive one communication from Georgetown here in Madras, the next from Bangalore, from an obscure post office in the hills, or a remote village in the plains. Let me think: the last was from a railway station called Erode—so you see, my dear sir, that your Uncle's movements are erratic, and his address is vague. Accept a piece of absolutely disinterested advice," and here the speaker tendered

a soft, empty hand. "You will do no good out here, you will only waste time and money, without results. Give up the quest, and return home!"

"No," and Mallender's eyes flashed. "What you say more than ever convinces me that the man who writes to you is a criminal, who goes in abject fear of his life, and is hiding from justice."

"Oh, very well, Captain Mallender, *very* well!" gobbled Mr. Fleming, and his tone was throaty and offended, "there is no more to be said—it is not our business to argue; we merely state facts. You say, you have no doubt that your relative is dead. You may also rest assured, that from the day it is made known to our client that you are determined to trace him—the allowance, as paid through our firm, will cease."

"Well, I'll take all risks," declared this rash adventurer. "And there is one thing I can promise you. I intend to put the fear of death into your—er—correspondent! Some fellows come out to India for what they call 'Shikar'; this business is *my* shikar—instead of bison, tiger, or elephants—and mind you, it's not Uncle I am bent on tracking, but your unseen client, the murderous ruffian who impersonates him!" Then, rising after a somewhat prolonged and hostile silence:

"Gentlemen, I see you are not disposed to wish me luck, so I must do my best to worry through alone. I shall call on you before I leave the country, and I'll let you know if I have any success. All letters to the Bank of Madras will be forwarded."

An extraordinary snorting noise, and the waving of a fin-like hand, was the only adieu vouchsafed by Mr. Fleming, but his partner jerked himself out of his seat, and said:

"All right, Captain Mallender, and I make no doubt that if you persist in your 'shikar,' we shall be communicating with you at an early date."

"Oh, you mean about the money? So be it," and

with a hasty farewell, the visitor effected a rapid exit, ran down the worn stone stairs, flung himself into his *gharry*, and commanded the driver to take him to the Brigade Office in St. George's Fort.

Meanwhile Mr. Fleming lay back in his office chair, mopping his glistening pink face, and gasped out:

"That young fellow is going to give trouble!"

To which unpleasant suggestion, his companion calmly replied:

"Trouble for himself—yes! He will burn his fingers badly, without money he is tethered, and cannot move far. I bet you what you like," rapping his glasses on the desk, "that we shall have him here before the rains borrowing the coin to take him to England."

CHAPTER II

Colonel Frederick Tallboys, Mallender Tallboys, to give him his complete name, held a high official appointment, and occupied suitable quarters in St. George's Fort. He belonged to a distant branch of the Mallender family, was head of a department, and the husband of a wealthy and worshipping wife. All his life—now numbering over fifty years—"Freddy" had been steady, hard-working, and far-seeing; passed his examinations creditably,—if without distinction,—and from an English regiment entered the good old Madras Staff Corps, and worked his way up from adjutant to wing officer, till he had at last succeeded in climbing into a comfortable berth in the secretariat.

His climb was possibly accelerated by an attractive personality, a buoyant manner, and a remarkable skill in horsemanship. For years "Freddy T." had been the most notable gentleman rider in the Presidency; indeed, such was his fame, that it extended to Lucknow, the Punjab, and had even oozed into far Cashmere; but now, this wise little man had discarded his racing colours, and was resting on well-earned laurels.

" Freddy T." was short, well-made, and remarkably dapper, with a pair of twinkling grey eyes—eyes quick to notice a misplaced badge, a woman's dress, or a breach of etiquette. He had a handsome nose, an imposing moustache, was always admirably turned out, and carried his well-groomed upright person with considerable dignity. In spite of certain insignificant foibles—a hot temper, and a vein of dogged obstinacy, he was popular all over the Presidency. Most people had a cordial word for " Freddy T.," who was known to be a smart officer, and as influential and good-natured as he was straight, and safe! During his years of expatriation, Tallboys had never lost his interest in Mallender of Mallender—the head of his house; unfortunately, like other old families, the race was now almost extinct. Geoffrey was the last of the direct line, and failing him, and an aged and decrepit cousin, this high official in Madras Fort was the next heir! But it was not on this account that Colonel Tallboys' interest in the family had been kept alight. As a raw youth from Bedford and Sandhurst, he had visited at Mallender, and never forgotten the charm and kindness of his lovely hostess; or how she had talked to, drawn out, and encouraged, a callow, awkward boy; the wise and witty things she said to him in those far-off days were still green in his memory; for her he had broken the ice of his reserve, and imparted to Mollie Mallender many opinions and aspirations that were withheld from his own widowed mother,—a helpless, faded lady, who spent half her days in bed, reading novelettes—the other half in bemoaning her health, her fate, and her servants. But this exquisite Irish cousin with her brilliant complexion, irresistible charm, eloquent dark eyes, and impulsive manner, was a divinity to whom the stiff shy youth immediately surrendered his heart and confidence. Cousin Mollie gave him self-respect, wise advice, courage, and an everlasting reverence for all womenkind—her sisters. In a secret pocket in his battered dressing-case (known only to his bearer)

there still reposed a little gold pencil-case, her gift, and several old and well-worn letters. Mrs. Mallender's influence was far-reaching, and radiated over two parishes; her generosity, energy, and high spirits were infectious. The prim old-fashioned "Court" became the centre of activity and gaiety. Edgar Mallender himself,—inclined to be misanthropic and morose,—expanded in such domestic sunshine, and took a prominent part in county business, and the affairs of his tenants and property; ably maintaining the family traditions, until the sudden death of his adorable wife. After this crushing loss, he became a changed man, declaring that a light had gone out, and left him for the rest of his life in outer darkness. Gradually, he sank from the sight of his neighbours, neglected his estates and his duties, and lived among his books, his memories, and his servants, the life of an eccentric, and recluse.

* * * * * *

The most ardent flatterer could not pretend that Colonel Tallboys looked "good-natured" this morning, as he sat before his big office table, gold spectacles on nose, reading a private letter; it was one which Geoffrey Mallender had despatched the week before he left for India, and as his relative perused it, his eyebrows knit, till they almost met over the bridge of his well-shaped nose; obviously he became every moment more and more astonished and annoyed This missive said:

"I have decided to take up the question of my Uncle's disappearance, and to thoroughly investigate the case."

"The boy's mad!" muttered Colonel Tallboys, as he hastily whirled over a page.

"I am starting for Madras by the next mail, and hope to arrive a week after you receive this."

"Why," glancing at the date, "it missed the mail. He may be here to-day—Good Lord!"

"I will look you up at once," continued the writer,

"and trust you will give me a helping hand, as you know the Presidency so well."

"Stark staring mad!" exclaimed Colonel Tallboys, pushing away the letter with a gesture of irritation. "Never heard of such an idea, never. *Help!*" The words seemed to choke him. "Well, I must put all this bother out of my head, and set to work," and he reached for a large bundle of official documents, in which he became speedily absorbed.

For an hour, he sat intent on his correspondence, glancing through papers, and making pencil notes; suddenly there was a sound of steps, and talking, he heard the door open, and a young and cheerful voice saying:

"All right, thanks, give Colonel Tallboys my card."

It was Geoffrey. He sprang to his feet, tore off his glasses, and turned to receive him.

"Hullo, Geoff!" shaking him warmly by the hand, "I'm glad to see you. Do you know, I only got your letter an hour ago—and so you have come out!"

"Yes, here I am."

Colonel Tallboys surveyed his kinsman with critical appraisement—in his opinion, appearance ranked high. A well-bred, well set-up young fellow, with the clear-cut Mallender nose, and his mother's dark eyes. Yes. An excellent specimen of the average good-looking Englishman!

"I've not seen you for years. How long ago is it?"

"Not since you came down to Eton on the 4th of June, and gave me a jolly good tip."

"Did I?—ha! ha! You have a long memory. Well, where are you staying? Or did you come straight from the station?"

"No; I arrived last night. I'm at a pot-house that calls itself 'Hotel St. George,' and reeks of rancid cocoanut oil. My driver introduced me."

"Good Lord, it's in Blacktown! I beg its pardon—Georgetown! Of course, you come to us at once. I'll send over a fellow to pack, and bring your kit. We are

pretty full, as this is the season, but Fanny will find you a corner."

"Oh, don't you bother about *me*," protested his cousin, "I'm only going to stop in Madras for two or three days, just to see you, get the hang of the country, and benefit of your experience—I expect you can give me lots of tips, and I want to arrange about money and letters, before I go off on my travels!"

"But, my dear boy," said Colonel Tallboys, sitting down as he spoke, and pointing to a chair, "you don't mean to tell me, that you are really *serious* about this business? You are not in earnest, in starting on such a wild-goose chase?"

"But of course I am, and in deadly earnest; that is what brought me out here, in the middle of the hunting season."

The young fellow with his mother's eyes, and her impulsive and warm-hearted nature, had also inherited his father's square jaw, and (cold thought) possibly been cursed with Edgar's stubborn will,—and curious strain of eccentricity!

For a few seconds Colonel Tallboys surveyed his visitor in grave speculative silence. At last he said:

"Well, look here, Geoffrey; you may as well spend two or three weeks with us, and see how the poor benighted Presidency enjoys itself? There are a couple of balls, a big gymkhana, and the polo tournament coming off. This is our cold weather."

"Is it?" and he laughed ironically. "Well, I'm glad you mentioned it!"

"Of course this is a particularly nasty day! Don't sample us by a beastly long-shore wind. By the by, you play polo—your regiment had a strong team. I used to see your name in matches. I'll find you ponies."

"It's most awfully good of you, Cousin Fred; polo and dances are all right—but you know what I'm out for, and *they* are not my job."

"No, but after a lapse of thirty years, a few weeks

one way or the other can't possibly matter, and Fanny and I would be mortally hurt if you start off without paying us a visit. We want to get to know you—and you want to get to know something of this blessed old country."

As the young man looked half persuaded he continued:

"Anyway, my dear fellow, you will never find your Uncle, and you may take my word for it. I've not lived out here for twenty-nine years without knowing what I am talking about. Now tell me something about yourself, and Mallender, and your poor father."

"Oh, yes! Well, you see, he had been ailing the last five years—the result of a bad fall from his horse—and he was greatly changed latterly. He could not bear to see anyone, would lie all day staring before him, and took no interest in any mortal thing!"

"No, not since your mother died, *that* I can well understand. You remember her, of course?"

The next moment Colonel Tallboys, who was proud of his tact, could have kicked himself. Why, the boy was fifteen when she died! Geoffrey made no reply, but he suddenly looked down, and his face seemed to quiver, and go white.

"What a lovely face! yes, and a lovely soul! There never was anyone like her." The speaker's voice sounded a little husky.

From the moment this sentence fell from his lips, Geoffrey entertained another feeling,—a sudden warm glow of personal affection,—for his dapper little kinsman, and instantly made up his mind to accept the invitation to spend some weeks in his company.

"And what does the old place look like now?" resumed Colonel Tallboys in a livelier key.

"It looks frightfully dilapidated. You see, the pater let things slide—the grounds, and the gardens, and the shooting. He only occupied a few rooms, and the rest of the house was given up to rats and damp; the paper was peel-

ing off the walls, the roof leaked like a sieve, and drains required to be overhauled. I'm getting the house done up."

"That will cost you a pretty penny!"

"Yes, I'm afraid so—it will mop up all my bit of capital."

"And so you chucked the service at seven-and-twenty! How was that?"

"Well, you see, my father made a point of it; the regiment was ordered to Egypt, and I could not get much leave, and anyway, I was all he had; but I don't mind telling you, Cousin Fred, that it was a wrench—I was most desperately sorry to go. Those bugles this morning in the Fort gave me—er—a horrible lump in my throat. Now I want to talk to you, if I am not taking up too much of your time."

"My time is my own," rejoined the little man rather grandly, "and anyway, it's not every day I have a call from *you*, Geoff."

"Then look here," tilting his chair nearer, "it's about this business—I want to know your opinion about Uncle Geoffrey."

"My opinion is, that he is dead—dead as a door-nail this thirty years," replied Colonel Tallboys with prompt decision.

"He certainly was not dead twenty-nine years ago, and supposing for the sake of argument he was still alive—I ask you just to look at the case from that point of view?"

"Possibly, but improbably, he got into some big scrape—and found it necessary to disappear."

"But by all accounts, he was straight as a die—no debts—no scandals," argued the young man.

"He is most certainly dead this many a day—or——" and the little Colonel pursed up his lips, and stonily contemplated the opposite wall.

"Or?" repeated Mallender eagerly.

"Oh, I could tell you queer stories. If Geoffrey is alive, I can solve the puzzle in six letters—'*a woman.*'"

"What—a black woman! Oh, rats! you're not

serious? though I've been to Brown and Co., and they hinted at the same thing."

"You did not get much change out of them, did you?"

"No, but I gathered that the man who impersonates my Uncle moves about within a radius of three hundred miles, more or less—and if he is to be found, I mean to have a good try. I told the old boys quite plainly, and they did not like it, no, not a little bit. I left them with their hackles up." He paused abruptly, for Colonel Tallboys—who had been lounging in his chair, nursing a remarkably neat foot and ankle—now sat erect, stiff as a ramrod; his face had assumed an entirely different aspect, it wore the expression of the President of a district court martial, who listens to some vital and unexpected evidence.

"I give you my solemn word of honour, Geoffrey, that I have not the vaguest idea of what you are talking about—a man who impersonates your Uncle—did you say?"

"Oh, of course I forgot that you had not heard anything. My father never told me, till a few weeks before he died."

"Yes, yes, yes, go on," urged his listener impatiently.

"You will see all about it in this," now producing a pocket-book, from which he carefully extracted a thin flimsy letter. "Our lawyers at home know of this, so do Brown and Co., but no one else."

Colonel Tallboys resumed his spectacles, and slowly read and re-read the contents of a single sheet of paper. Here was the second startling episode, which had come before him that morning. As he studied the faded lines, he was thinking hard, and swiftly making up his mind. So Geoffrey the elder was alive, and Geoffrey the younger, in spite of his mandate, had come out to search for him—and thereby risk the loss of the whole of his income. Of course, such madness must be put a stop to: he would look after Mollie Mallender's boy, and save him from himself. With

the alertness of a mental gymnast, his active and well-trained brain was already weaving schemes, and like a character in ancient melodrama he promptly decided to "dissemble."

"By Jove! so your Uncle is actually alive, and in India! I am completely bowled out—what an amazing thing!" As he tenderly refolded the frail letter he added: "Bazaar paper, and bazaar ink. I say! if you hunt him down, you forfeit four thousand a year, eh? It's rather a wild enterprise!"

"It would be if my Uncle were alive, but I believe this travelling criminal is the man who has made away with him."

"So you are determined to run your head against a brick wall—obstinacy is a family trait."

"If you call my father's last wish a brick wall, I am here to deal with it," and he sat back, as if to study the effect of his announcement.

"Oh, well, well, poor fellow," mumbled Colonel Tallboys, "no doubt he was in a weak state."

"Bodily, yes; but his mind was stronger than it had been for a long time. He had a vivid dream about his brother." Geoffrey paused and coloured, noticing his listener's expression of amused, but tolerant, disdain. "I say! you are not laughing, are you?"

"No, my dear boy—go on, go on."

"He said he saw him beckoning to him with one hand, whilst he held the other over his eyes—it was always the same dream—he dreamt it many times, and he felt, when he was helpless and dying, that he had made a mistake in not setting this letter aside, and coming straight out here; but, you see, he was in love with my mother, and there was the money, and other things, and so he stayed at home; but the affair preyed on his conscience more and more every year; till at last it became an obsession. Latterly, he could talk of nothing else; he said he was a miserable coward, who had deserted his only brother, and that my mother's death was his punishment; he worked himself up

into a fearful state of excitement, and made me swear to undertake a duty in which he had failed."

"But God bless me, Geoffrey! there is this letter in black and white, forbidding any search—as plain as plain can be."

"Yes, but my father thought the letter was a forgery."

"What do Brown and Brown say?"

"They declare the letter to be genuine."

"Ah, and I agree with them! Your father's mind was undoubtedly unhinged by a long illness."

"But mine is not, Cousin Fred. At first, I must confess, I was rather reluctant to come out,—though, of course, I intended to keep my word; but by degrees, when I was all alone at Mallender, the idea grew upon me; *I* had no dreams, but I had the picture of Uncle Geoffrey always facing me in the dining-room—an oil-painting in uniform, done before he left England—and it seemed to me that he not only took his meals with me, but rode, and walked, and sat with me as well; and I knew I'd never shake off the delusion—if it was a delusion—till I had left no stone unturned out here—and here I am! I see you think I'm *crazy?* Stark mad. Eh?"

"And have you any plans?" asked his cousin abruptly.

"Not anything very definite. I know that my Uncle or his double is in this Presidency—within about three hundred miles of Madras City."

"Then what is your scheme? your proposed campaign? Surely you won't advertise in the press, and have every filthy European loafer claiming a beloved nephew, and howling on his neck?"

"Certainly not," replied Mallender, who looked a little nettled; "I consulted a firm of smart lawyers, as our own old stick-in-the-muds were dead against my trip, and they put me on to a private enquiry firm of the name of Jaffer, who live in the City of Hyderabad in the Deccan."

"By George, they must do a great business! The

city is full of the bad characters of every nation, people, and tongue. Well, go on."

"And Jaffer and Co. believe they can help me; and say that a good many men disappear in India much in the same way; but, of course, they don't know it is not my Uncle I expect to find—I'm afraid you look upon me as a lunatic?"

"No, no. I see that you feel the claims of kinship as keenly as I do myself; but you are wrong in starting on this crazy quest. If your Uncle is alive—I believe he has gone *native.* Take my advice," and he looked full into Mallender's grave face, "let sleeping dogs lie."

"Not this sleeping dog!" rejoined the young man, with unexpected energy. "The clever brute who murdered my Uncle draws his money and forges his name!"

"Well, well, Geoffrey, the weather is far too muggy for argument, we must agree to differ. One thing is certain; you cannot go up country as ignorant as a new-born Europe babe; you must give us a couple of months at least—till we start for the Neilgherries."

"It's most awfully kind of you; and I'd like to stay with you for a few weeks and learn a little experience."

"Then that's settled," said Colonel Tallboys aloud. To himself: "Fan will easily keep this headstrong fellow amused, perhaps entangle him in a matrimonial engagement, and drive this lunacy out of his head."

"Just one word more, my dear boy. For God's sake, don't let a soul know of your *real* reason for your trip to this country. If it ever got out, you'd be the laughing-stock of all Madras!"

At this painful announcement Geoffrey coloured up to his crisp brown hair.

"Come now," he continued, "put it before yourself impartially. What would *you* think of a fellow coming to India to hunt for a lost relative, when he had been expressly warned that if he made a search he would lose four thousand a year?"

"Yes, I admit that it sounds fairly mad; so I'll keep

all particulars dark; but mad or not, nothing shall stop me—or choke me off!" declared Mallender with vehement sincerity.

"All right, all right, meanwhile we will give out that you are interested in coffee in Mysore, or gold mines—yes, that is best—it's more *vague*," added Colonel Tallboys, with a grin. "And now, the first thing to do is to find you a first-class boy."

"Boy?"

"A servant—a full-grown man; anything up to eighty years of age is a boy here. I know of one, Anthony, he speaks Telagu, Canarese, Tamil, English, and at a pinch French! He will cook for you, valet you, wait on you, and generally run you, and do for you—he is just out of a place—his master went home last mail."

"But I only want a smart, honest chap that can rough it a bit," protested the new-comer.

"Oh, Anthony has often been in camp, and on shooting trips; he is a capital servant. My bearer will get hold of him at once, and now I'll 'phone for the car, and take you to the Club for tiffin—there you shall taste for the first time in your life the real, true, and only prawn curry."

CHAPTER III

WITH a quick, assured step Colonel Tallboys led the way along matted corridors, past salaaming peons, to a fine Napier car, in which he and his guest seated themselves; and escorted by a roaring wind, and clouds of thick red dust, thundered through the Wallajah gate, and sped past the Island towards the hub of Madras—its far-famed Club.

"We are rather full just now, with a crowd down from Bangalore, and one or two of Fan's English friends; Sir William Bream, a distant cousin, and Mrs. Villars, a smart lady, doing India," explained Colonel Tallboys; "you won't mind if we stick you in a tent for a day or two, will you?"

"On the contrary, I shall enjoy it of all things—I like camp life."

"You mean the manœuvres at home, all rain and mud, galloping and shouting—my little camp is another sort of show. Well, here we are," as they glided into a vast compound and drew up at the Club entrance. "Come along," said Colonel Tallboys briskly, "this way to the dining-room."

As they went upstairs, and moved forward, Mallender's popular pioneer scattered friendly greetings here and there among his acquaintances, who did not fail to notice the good-looking stranger in his wake—undoubtedly a soldier, with an easy cavalry lounge. *En route* to a favourite table Colonel Tallboys encountered a particular chum, to whom he introduced his cousin, murmuring in a low aside:

"Just out from home—place under repair—come to have a look round before he settles."

When repeating this information to a neighbour the friend supplemented:

"He need not trouble himself; Mrs. Tallboys will undertake his *settling*, and marry him off out here!"

The prospect amused them, and they laughed heartily.

Tiffin was excellent, the prawn curry maintained its high reputation; Mallender, who had breakfasted on sour grey bread, buffalo butter, and bad coffee, was ravenously hungry, and thoroughly appreciated this his first genuine meal in India, served, too, in a cool, lofty dining-room, with tempered sea-breezes, and deft, white-clad waiters.

"A fine Club, is it not?" said Colonel Tallboys with the air of a proud proprietor. "The oldest in India; we can dine three hundred, the reading-room is the same size, now we have an annexe—a ladies' club—'The Morghi Khana'—where they assemble for tea, and bridge."

"You don't allow them in here! Eh?"

"No, these premises are sacred—we are uncommonly strict and exclusive. Do you notice the servants' quaint

dress? Real old Madras fashion, and the quantities of chutney offered—another speciality—but soon you will know your way about, and become acquainted with our bar trick, and Saturday's prunes and cream."

When cheese and fruit had been despatched, a move was made to the great lounge; here, reclining in a long chair, they discovered a disconsolate young man, whose bowed head and limp attitude proclaimed some recent affliction.

"Hullo, Byng, you seem a bit off colour, what's up?" demanded Colonel Tallboys; "all the ponies gone lame, or dead?"

"Nearly as bad," answered Captain Byng—A.D.C. to His Excellency the Governor—as he rose and unfolded a tall, slim figure; "Grafton has broken his arm playing some fool's trick over the mess table, and he was our mainstay."

"By Jove, that's a calamity! But"—looking round—"here is a substitute for you; my cousin, Captain Mallender, who arrived yesterday, plays polo. Geoffrey, this is Captain Byng, captain of the Chaffinches."

"Mallender! You are Mallender of the Warlocks, I'm sure," said the A.D.C. eagerly. "You played back in the team; I've seen you at Barnes and Hurlingham,—this *is* a piece of luck!"

"But I'm quite out of practice," Mallender declared; "haven't had a stick in my hand for months! Besides, I've no ponies. You are very kind, but I'm no use."

Long before he had ceased to speak his protest was drowned in an animated duet between two voices, discussing ways and means.

Colonel Tallboys was anxious to secure a congenial occupation for his elusive guest, and Captain Byng, in this hard-hitting player, saw visions of victory instead of defeat. At least he was now assured of making a strong fight against the Chokras from Ooty and the famous Marauders from Bangalore.

Within three minutes the matter had been decided; Mallender's objections were offered to deaf ears; the

question of ponies, practice, and, if it came to that, kit, was disposed of with almost contemptible ease!

"I'll expect you out at Guindy to practice to-morrow at six-thirty sharp," was Byng's authoritative announcement; "you shall try some jolly good ponies, Malabar and Chutney and Cossack—eh, Colonel? What's your weight?"

"Eleven stone—I'm afraid I put up something on board ship."

"Oh, you'll be all right; we have a nice ground in topping order, and our men are as keen as mustard. I," drawing a long breath, "breathe again."

Byng's enthusiasm proved infectious; Mallender, a lover of the game, soon threw himself into the subject with the zest and simplicity of a schoolboy, and listened with the profoundest interest to all particulars concerning the five competing teams.

"With a week's hard practice I might be useful," he admitted, "anyway, I'll do my very best. I suppose you play eight minutes a chukker?"

Colonel Tallboys, who had been a silent and attentive looker-on, now interposed.

"I say, Byng, I'll leave Mallender in your hands for racquets, billiards, and talk. I've got a heap of work to do, very important letters, and must get back to the office at once. Geoffrey, I'll call here for you at half-past five—or six. Keep your eye on him, Byng!" he added with a laugh as he hurried out of the smoking-room.

"Your cousin?" said Byng, as he offered a box of Trichis.

"Yes, one of my few relations—I've not seen him for fourteen years."

"Ah! I wish to goodness I could say the same of some of *mine!*" rejoined the A.D.C., throwing himself back in his luxurious club chair, and striking a match. "Let me tell you that your kinsman is a rare good sort—one of the real, sporting, open-handed lot that, I'm sorry to say, are getting a bit scarce. He does you rattling well, likes to have his house full—sometimes the guests over-

flow into tents! He's awfully popular, too, and it's *not* cupboard love! Latterly he has given up riding races, and his Missus bars polo; but he is a capital racquet player, and as for dancing, there isn't a girl in the place who wouldn't throw me over for a turn with *him*. You are staying there—Hooper's Gardens."

"Is that what it's called?"

"Yes, but mind you, it's not like our Grosvenor Gardens, or Chesterfield Gardens, at home; these houses—sort of nabobs' palaces—built by merchants in the Fort, were where they took refuge during the long-shore winds, such as we have to-day. There is a big dinner on to-night. By the way, you have seen Mrs. Tallboys?"

"No, not yet."

"One of the best! Awfully rich, but, bar the hospitality, you'd swear she had not a *sou;* keeps a sort of Home of Rest for Invalids, and a Matrimonial Agency for girls; what she gives to charity on the quiet would pay for a polo club—or run a racing stable."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Mallender.

"Well, to-morrow I'll expect you out at Guindy, A.D.C.'s quarters. We will have a practice, you can write your name in the book, and in the cool of the evening I'll drive you in—how's that?"

"All right, you're very kind."

"Not a bit of it, you are going to get me out of a big hole. The season is in full swing, you are just in the nick of time."

"But I'm not here for society; I'm going up country on—er—business."

"Not you!" with a derisive laugh. "Mrs. Tallboys will freeze on to you, you'll be one of her boys, she loves boys and girls, and is a shameless matchmaker, married off two of her own plain nieces—and both into the Civil Service! You'll find a wonderful atmosphere of joy and gladness about the house, such go, and good fellowship. By Jove, it flies to your head, and you have a near shave of losing it!"

" Then it's a risky place ? "

" Rather ; it ought to be marked with a red triangle, ' Dangerous to Bachelors.' Mrs. Tallboys has a knack of assembling original and amusing people, not to speak of the poor, and friendless. I believe she has a large assortment this week from Bangalore and Trichy. Among the collection is Mrs. Villars ; she is jolly good-looking, one of the prettiest women I've ever set eyes on. I hope I shall take her in to dinner to-night."

" I hope you may," was the generous reply.

" Well, we can't sit here all day ; it's too hot for racquets," said Byng, laying down the stump of his cigar ; " shall we go and have a game of billiards ?—I'll play you a hundred up."

CHAPTER IV

On his way to his office—and important correspondence —Colonel Tallboys made a long détour to Egmore, in order to advise, and take council with, Fanny his wife. Arrived at Hooper's Gardens, he ran up the marble stairs with enviable activity, and dashed into the boudoir, calling :

" Fan—Fan—I say, where are you, Fan ? "

In immediate response, a door opened, and Mrs. Tallboys appeared ; a stately figure, clad in a flowing white dressing-gown ; yet, in spite of her deshabille, this lady must be accorded a formal, and particular introduction.

Ten years previously, when at home on leave, Major Tallboys elected to take the waters at Harrogate—more as a precaution than otherwise. Here, an idle stranger in the smoking-room of a great hotel, he foregathered with a good-looking, genial neighbour ; he liked his face, approved his clothes, and admired his boots. They discussed the weather, racing, and forthcoming meetings, and finally drifted into that absorbing and dangerous mäelstrom—politics. Luckily they were of the same mind, and the unani-

mity of their opinions, the warmth of their convictions, and mutual detestations, firmly cemented the acquaintance. The agreeable stranger turned out to be Mr. Joseph Bond, a cotton broker from Liverpool, who subsequently presented Major Tallboys to his party. The party was composed of his wife, her sister, Mrs. Tubbs, and a cousin; the latter a pale, lank, dejected lady in mourning. Mrs. Bond and Mrs. Tubbs were of a different type; fine big women, boisterous, and loud of voice, who dressed in the last shriek of fashion, and smoked cigarettes at all hours of the day. When her hilarious companions departed for long motor trips, Miss Bond, abandoned to her own resources, sat reading or sewing in the lounge—or sedately paced the grounds in an unbecoming hat, heavily swathed in *crêpe*. Major Tallboys, confined to the town by the exigencies of a strict cure,—being naturally sociable and talkative,—made civil overtures to this neglected, and solitary damsel. His manner was attractive, his appearance prepossessing, and as the pair strolled about, he gathered that she had recently experienced a bereavement, and was now alone in the world.

For his part, the dapper little officer volunteered copious information respecting India, and his experiences; he enjoyed the sound of his own voice, whether on parade or otherwise, and in Fanny Bond found an eager, and enraptured listener. As her companion described the glories of the East, its dawns and sunsets, people and pleasures, and drew vivid pictures of marches up country, and the racing triumphs and hair-breadth adventures of his youth, the lady's interest was gratifying and profound.

In an irresponsible burst of confidence she confided to him, that it had ever been the dream of her life to see the world, and, above all, India.

Day after day, these walks and monologues were prolonged. Her cousins, who had not failed to notice the said walks and talks, tormented their helpless

victim with winks, nudges, and vulgar and incessant chaff, that made poor Fanny blush to tears.

When discussing family matters in the privacy of her bedroom, Mrs. Bond had said to her sister: "If the dandy little officer has taken a fancy to Fan—it will be a very good business!"

"Too good to be true," interjected Mrs. Tubbs. "No such luck."

"It's rather a puzzle to know what to do with her; she can't go back to that awful little house in Tranmere, and, besides, she's too young to live alone, and set up a cat and a parrot."

"Yes, poor thing, she's had a starved life, and is as timid as a mouse."

"No wonder, after her awful time with Uncle James," declared Mrs. Bond; "such pinching and screwing, and scolding, and badgering, as was never known. You leave the business to me, and I'll have a little talk with her friend, and let him know that Fan has a bit of money—and no near relations!"

In order to carry out her project, that same evening, after dinner, Major Tallboys' particular horror—the loudest and showiest of the sisters—invited him to come into the conservatory for a smoke, and tell *her* something about India.

He obeyed with prompt gallantry,—though secretly alarmed. This bold-eyed matron with a voice of brass had, undoubtedly, something up her sleeve.

After a few vague enquiries respecting heat, and snakes, Mrs. Bond, assuming a more confidential attitude, took the plunge.

"Do you know, Major Tallboys, you have made Cousin Fanny just crazy about India. Poor dear, she has seen so little of the world."

"So I gather from what she told me."

"I'll bet you a pair of gloves she never told you the reason," the lady went on impressively, "or that she has been a slave and a martyr to a terrible old father for ten years! Poor Fan was his drudge and nurse,

and yet she never complained—though it was a dog's life."

"Some dogs haven't half a bad time," argued her companion (who was thinking of his own happy pack and their assiduous "dog boy").

"Not those that are chained in back yards," declared the matchmaker. "Fan was always on the chain."

"Did no one interfere?"

"What can you do, between a father and a daughter? —though he was a Pharaoh—not a father. Besides, we were all mortally afraid of Uncle James, and never went near him. His temper was something frightful —just like a tiger with the toothache!"

"How exceedingly unpleasant! Was he always in this deplorable condition?" enquired Major Tallboys.

"No, he lost a lot of money in some shipping firm, and that soured him for life. He dropped all his friends, and gave up a fine house in Prince's Park, Liverpool, and went over to a dingy little terrace in Tranmere. We never could make out, if he was very poor, or just a miser. I know, he only took a weekly paper, and gave Fan ten pounds a year to dress on. Now she is free, and her own mistress, she does not know what to do with her liberty, and believes she is grieving for the old man."

Here Mrs. Bond paused for breath, and to dab the stump of her cigarette in the ash-tray.

"His affairs were in a shocking state," she resumed, "one would think a monkey had kept his books; but my Joe says there will be a good bit of money, and that Fan will have between four and five hundred a year!"

Major Tallboys liked Fan for herself, and had hitherto believed her to be of the genus "poor relation." He noticed that she was the Cinderella of the family, who ran messages, was left out of expeditions, and evidently held of no account. Four or five hundred a year would be an agreeable addition to a major's pay and allow-

ances. He chucked the end of his cigar into a shrub, and looked Mrs. Bond squarely in the face.

"And I tell you this," she continued eagerly, "Fan is the kindest, simplest, and most unselfish of women; whoever gets her"—patting his sleeve with a hateful significance—"will have the best of wives!"

"I am sure of that," he agreed in a studiously bland voice, but his air was cold and detached, his eyes gleamed frostily, under his somewhat heavy brows. He was fond of Fanny, but he had no intention of being managed and rushed by this great, blowsy woman, and abruptly turned the conversation by remarking:

"I see by the evening paper they have a heat wave in Berlin; how fortunate *we* are in our weather!"

"It was no go," the disconcerted matron whispered to her sister; "I did my big best, but he wouldn't rise—no, not even when I mentioned her income! He got quite lofty, and shut me up by talking of the *weather*. So now I can see Fan in our spare back, at Waterloo, for life; I shall charge her four guineas a week, and laundry. After all, she will be useful! Since Nan has her hair up she is a regular handful, and must have some sort of keeper or chaperone to take her to her classes in Liverpool."

"Nan is as clever as they make 'em, and no fool," remarked her aunt. "Pity she's so ugly," she added with that unaffected candour habitual among near relatives; "I'm afraid you'll never get her off—no more than Fan—she's so cocksey, and so blunt."

Meanwhile, behind a newspaper in the smoking-room, Major Tallboys was holding a serious mental debate. Of late, as he made his leisured and fastidious toilet, and preened himself before a glass, he noticed with grief and pain the deeper furrows in his forehead, and the whitening of his brown hair. Yes, he was getting on, and if he ever meant to marry, there was no time to be lost! His mind's eye cast a nervous glance towards the army of elderly and old men who rented rooms near the Club—their only home; men, without family

ties or affection, their whole interest bounded by the daily press; desolate poor fellows, who were tended in sickness by a landlady, or a professional nurse, and passed out of life, unsped, and unwept.

Fanny Bond was amiable and sympathetic; amazingly well read too!—a free library had been her only solace and joy. Children and dogs adored her; her appreciation of himself was unquestionable! She had a slim, graceful figure, a certain amount of good looks—masses of dark hair, a pair of confiding brown eyes, slightly prominent, but otherwise perfect teeth. Her relatives however were a serious drawback;—in fact, Mrs. Bond's impudent interference had gone near to shattering her cousin's prospects—but down in his little battered heart there was a warm corner for Fanny; and a nice-looking, unselfish woman, with five hundred a year, was by no means to be despised.

Night brings wisdom, and the morning after his interview with Mrs. Joe, arrayed in a creaseless suit and wearing his most becoming tie, Major Tallboys invited Miss Bond "to come for a turn in the garden?" By degrees, he conducted the conversation to her favourite subject, travel.

"I believe we are going to Switzerland this winter," she announced, "and I cannot tell you how much I look forward to my first trip abroad."

The pair were now pacing a retired walk, overshadowed by a rustic pergola veiled in masses of pink roses,—one of the glories of the hotel garden. Major Tallboys, casting a searching glance over his surroundings, came to an abrupt halt. Although a ladies' man, and the hero of countless flirtations, the good-looking, agreeable little soldier was about to make his first serious proposal!

This resolution had been hardening in his mind ever since he had swallowed his early morning cup of tea.

"How would you like to go to India?" he enquired of his companion.

Colouring vividly, she exclaimed, "Oh, I should like it better than anything in the world, but I shall never get the chance!"

She looked surprisingly handsome, with her glowing cheeks, and soft dark eyes; the plain, ill-made alpaca entirely failed to conceal her slender grace.

"Well, Miss Bond," clearing his throat and looking at her steadily, "I offer you the chance here and now. Fanny, I am greatly attached to you—will you be my wife?" and he tendered a thin, sun-dried hand.

For a moment Fanny felt stunned; she stared at her suitor with stupefied incredulity, then burst into tears.

This sudden opening of the gates of the world and life, so far transcended her humble hopes. In spite of her cousins' crude and brutal chaff, Fanny had never thought of the Major's attentions as otherwise than the good-nature of an idle man, who noticed that she was forlorn, and a little out of it—the word "neglected" never occurred to her simple heart.

Tears such as Miss Bond's are quickly dried—on this occasion they were dealt with by the Major's own delicate silk handkerchief. For some time, she and her companion remained talking very earnestly to one another under the pergola, but what they said was known only to eavesdropping "Dorothy Perkins" and her pretty sisters.

Within half an hour, an engaged couple—each decorated with a pink rose—turned their happy faces towards the hotel. As they approached with lagging steps, they were "spotted" by Mrs. Joe, who happened to be extended in a verandah chair, smoking the inevitable cigarette, and mentally selecting her autumn toilette. In a second, she had realised the situation, and springing to her feet, upsetting an ink-bottle and ash-tray, she clapped her hands in noisy acclamation.

It was arranged that the wedding was to take place within a month—since there was really nothing to wait for, and the bridegroom wished the bride to see something of her own country, before sailing for India.

Bond himself was a good fellow, but his wife, sister-in-law, and mother-in-law—no. To Major Tallboys it was unbearable that he should be called "Freddy," in season and out of season, and publicly chaffed and *kissed*, by the overwhelming Mrs. Joe. The trousseau was selected in Liverpool—that city of fine shops—and Major Tallboys gave his fiancée a diamond ring, an unpretentious pendant, and much valuable advice. The honeymoon was spent in London, with excursions to Devon, Oxford, and Warwickshire; the newly married pair also made a round of the theatres, picture galleries, and museums. Great indeed are the marvels that dress, and a good conceit of oneself, can achieve. Joe Bond, meeting his cousin in a shop, actually failed to recognise in this elegant lady, with rustling skirts, a black-feathered hat, white gloves, and beautifully dressed hair, the dowdy and deprecating Fan!

Shortly before they sailed, the happy couple received intelligence calculated to still further increase their bliss.

The affairs of the late James Bond, merchant and shipmaster, had been wound up, and proved that he had been a miser, and, like his kind, had died a wealthy man. "Frances Ann," his only child, was heiress to something over five thousand a year.

Mrs. Tallboys' relatives received these tidings with unaffected consternation, and annoyance. Here was Fanny, a rich woman, married to a stuck-up little dandy who was carrying her and her fine fortune out of the country. The capital of this fortune would have made a noble bulwark to the house of "Bond, Tubbs, and Co." cotton brokers, and enabled them to extend their business into hitherto undreamt of regions. Had the Major any inkling of this hidden treasure when he proposed to Fan? The base suspicion was unfounded—nevertheless it rankled. Freddy Tallboys was equally thunderstruck by this amazing windfall; as for his wife—recalling long years of grey poverty—she could not realise her tens of thousands, and felt as if the whole

world had been turned upside down! However, her clever and practical husband promptly grasped the change in their circumstances, interviewed lawyers, bankers, stockbrokers, purchased for Fan a string of pearls, a superb landau, and a supply of plate and china,—suitable foı entertaining on a generous scale.

Arriving from furlough with a bride whose fortune had been magnified to millions, his many friends welcomed and applauded clever Freddy. He had waited to some purpose! At one time it had been feared that he was about to be snapped up by a girl from Bellary, a hard-riding, red-haired spin, without a pice!

The return to India, a familiar environment, and a full and busy life, had worked a transformation in Fanny's husband, and placed him before her in a still more dazzling light.

On furlough, this naturally keen and busy officer found himself a nobody!—idle, bored, unrecognised, and consequently inclined to be irritable, super-critical, and dyspeptic. Once more in harness (a nice staff appointment) and surrounded by familiar scenes and old associates, he was a different person full of high spirits, buoyant energy, and bonhomie.

His bride recognised his importance in his own circle, his popularity among men, and looked with awe upon orderlies, brass-bound chuprassies, long official envelopes, and the ever-arriving telegram. A Freddy, wearing a clanking sword and gold spurs, was new to her, and indeed Major Tallboys in full-dress uniform (a pattern to his rank) presented a remarkably dignified, and soldierlike, appearance.

After a short stay in Madras, a bungalow in the Neilgherries was Fanny's first home. It was at Ooty that she engaged her Indian retinue, unpacked her glass and china, and set up her own dog. Her husband's friends, so well known by name, had unanimously offered her a hearty welcome; these were mostly military people, with easy, agreeable manners. Her garden was fragrant with roses and violets, the view from the verandah of

Cranford Hall was unsurpassed, and how the sun shone! Caught into a whirl of congenial society, Frances Ann found herself in another world.

She realised that she owed this translation from suburbia and gloom to sunshine and happiness, to Freddy, and worshipped him accordingly. To behold him of a hunting morning, red-coated, admirably mounted, "witching the field with matchless horsemanship," was a sight that filled his wife with a pride and admiration, she was at no pains to conceal.

Under her husband's guidance and encouragement, Fanny cast away her shyness, and learnt to play tennis, to drive a pair of hard-mouthed ponies, and to entertain with self-confidence and grace. So adaptable was she, that by the end of a year, there was no more popular hostess than Mrs. Tallboys.

Her kind heart, the memory of her dreary youth, and gratitude for present good fortune, combined to make her tenderly sympathetic,—especially towards forlorn, friendless girls, and all sorts, and conditions, of her own sex.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile, Mrs. Tallboys is figuratively waiting in the doorway, her long dark hair hanging in two thick plaits, her eyes fixed interrogatively upon her lord and master.

"I've had such a morning!" she began, "going through the rooms, arranging for people, sending the new-comers into dinner according to precedence, doing the flowers and menus, that I'm dead, and am taking forty winks before they all arrive. Is there anything you want altered, Freddy?"

"No, no, my love; I've just rushed in for a second to tell you about young Mallender. I couldn't say much on the telephone," and in a couple of pithy sentences, he had laid before her Geoffrey's extraordinary enterprise.

"Of course, it must be stopped! He is mad to start off at once. I've handed him over to Byng at the Club,

and stuck him to play in the tournament; this will give us breathing-time."

"Breathing-time," repeated his wife, whose astonishment had carried her into an arm-chair.

"Here, read this," handing her the precious letter, "and you will understand the whole position. I know you are safe, Fan, and can be trusted with a family secret."

For a moment he stood watching her closely as she sat engrossed in the sheet of thin yellow paper; then he fidgetted restlessly round the room, straightening a book here, an ornament there.

"What astounding news!" she exclaimed at last; "can you believe it? Do you think it's *pucka?* or a practical joke?"

"I believe the letter to be genuine," he answered decisively, "and if the boy—a very nice young fellow—persists in his folly, he will be made to pay for it! Four thousand a year is no blind nut, and I intend to put every possible obstacle in his way; not merely because I am heir, but because I like him."

"What sort of obstacles do you suggest, Freddy?"

"Amusements, distractions, polo, balls, pretty faces. We will knock this nonsense out of his head, and take him to the Hills when we move; there he can shoot and hunt, and you might marry him off to some nice girl; by the time the roof is on, they can return and live at Mallender!"

"Ah, so that's your programme!" exclaimed his wife. "Well, of course, I shall be only too delighted to help; but perhaps your cousin is not so easily managed, and married off, as you suppose!"

"Oh, he'll be all right. I fancy he got a bit hipped, living all alone. I leave you to tackle him, Fan; this sort of job is your speciality. Keep the boy incessantly occupied and entertained, and, whatever you do, my dear girl, don't let him slip through your fingers!"

And with this emphatic injunction Colonel Tallboys waved a valedictory hand, and disappeared.

CHAPTER V

Surrounded by a group to whom Byng had introduced him, Mallender was enjoying himself thoroughly, listening and talking to keen young men of the same upbringing and service—his contemporaries.

Six months at Mallender had undoubtedly depressed his spirits. After the death of his father, lawyers, surveyors, and contractors were his sole associates; for of late years the Court had fallen into oblivion; old friends had died or removed to other neighbourhoods, and a new generation arisen which knew not the heir. It was out of the question to invite guests to his shabby dilapidated home, where the water streamed through the roof, and there was no shooting. This unexpected change to a bright glimpse of his former life, proved inexpressibly welcome to Geoffrey: here were men well known to him by name, and actually an old schoolfellow, who was quartered in the Fort. As they sat smoking, and discussing shop, racing, polo, and mutual friends, in such congenial atmosphere, the new-comer had for the moment completely lost sight of what he mentally called "his job." Colonel Tallboys, when he arrived, instantly grasped the situation. Here was Geoffrey full of animation and enthusiasm, debating and criticising the entries for Punchestown. This was as it should be—the lure was already working!

To tell the truth, although Mallender had spent five happy hours within the Club, these hours had passed so rapidly, that it seemed incredible when his cousin announced that "it was after six o'clock, and time to make a start."

The transformation of the outward scene appeared equally surprising. The wind had died away, the

breakers merely sobbed softly on the beach ; a clear Eastern night was full of stars, and the light of electric lamps penetrated into every corner. Numbers of motors were parked in the vast compound ; in some sat various gay and smart ladies, sipping iced drinks, eating devilled biscuits, and holding informal meetings with their men friends. Now and then a car would slip out of the crowd, and take the Mem Sahib and her cavalier for a turn up the Guindy Road, or along the marine front, —whilst the lady's husband was finishing an interminable rubber of auction bridge. It had been one o'clock when Mallender left the Fort—at an hour when all Madras was under the spell of noonday quiet ; servants were " eating rice," animals resting, the very crows and hawks temporarily suppressed—but now the city was awake ; the Gorah bazaar, and Georgetown, were humming like bee-hives, heavily laden trams, crammed with passengers, clanged and rumbled up and down the Mount Road, the old established " Europe " shops, such as Orr's, Spencer's, and Oak's, were brilliantly alight and filled with customers ; motors and bicycles skimmed hither and thither—luxurious carriages drawn by steppers rolled by, whilst picturesque foot-passengers, Jutkas, and leisurely bullock-carts gave a touch of local colour to the scene.

Such was the traffic, that it was a considerable time before Colonel Tallboys' Napier could extricate itself and thread its smooth way by Royàpetta towards Egmore. As the car turned sharply through an entrance gate and up the long drive to Hooper's Gardens, Mallender was both impressed and surprised. Here was no mere bungalow, but the lofty stately dwelling of a one-time merchant prince—reared in an age when space, and rupees, were amply available.

" Hooper's Gardens " stood surrounded by fifty acres of short, coarse grass, a white, two-storied mansion with pillared verandahs, a flat roof, and imposing portico. Against a dense background of palms and shrubberies were pitched a group of tents.

"We are a bit on the outside skirts of fashion," explained Colonel Tallboys, "but it's a noble, spacious old house—built in spacious times. One or two wealthy natives live hereabouts in others of the same class. My neighbour is a Prince of the family of Gulberga. His premises are a jungle, the whole place is disgracefully kept, full of horses, mountebanks, and squalid retainers. The fellow is a *terrible* drawback, I must confess. Well, here we are," he added as the car stopped; "I expect we shall find Fanny in the drawing-room."

In another moment he had ushered his relative into a lofty apartment, lit by carefully shaded electric lights. As Mallender advanced, he was aware of a number of people standing in a group. One of these, a tall lady, now came sweeping towards him, with an outstretched hand, and said:

"I am sure you are Fred's cousin. I am so pleased to see you."

Mallender felt instinctively attracted—few could resist Fanny Tallboys, and her kindly, warm-hearted smile.

After they had exchanged a few words, Colonel Tallboys broke in fussily:

"Come along, Geoffrey, and I'll show you your quarters. Fan," to his wife, "you'd better look sharp and dress; you know the General, like the Duke of Wellington, is always a quarter of an hour before his time."

Mallender's quarters were in the encampment, and in his host's wake he stumbled his way among ropes and lanterns into a large comfortable "Hill" tent. Here he discovered that all his belongings had already been unpacked. On the bed, lay his evening clothes, shirt, socks, and handkerchief; on a little table beside it, were piously arranged his Prayer Book, and the photographs of his father and mother.

A rather undersized native, with an intelligent, smiling face, wearing a tweed coat, cord breeches, and leggings, had hastily risen to his feet and salaamed.

"Here is Anthony," said Colonel Tallboys, with a wave of the hand. "Hullo, what's this? What tom-fool clothes are these?" he sternly demanded.

"Major Morant, saar, that very kind gentleman going England, giving me polo kit, and one cricket suit, one fancy dress, and one mess jacket," replied Anthony with voluble respect.

"And you are showing off your new duds! Mind, in service you've got to wear your white coat and trousers—*no* fancy costume. Geoffrey, you will have to keep an eye on this fellow. Well, I must be off, it's uniform night, on account of the General, but you'll be all right in black."

Mallender felt inclined to declare that "he felt all wrong in black," but already his host was out of earshot, and Anthony and his new employer were alone.

"Master liking to see my characters?" he asked, producing what looked like a silk *hussif*, from which he unrolled and offered a variety of sheets of crested paper.

Mallender took them and, sitting on the side of his cot, glanced over the bundle. These "chits" were as a whole favourable; some were serious, and even grateful; two were humorous, one was in rhyme, and another conveyed the information that "Anthony, i.e. 'Smiler,' was capable and trustworthy, very inquisitive, vain, and a great talker, and that the writer would not be willing to buy him at his own price, and sell him at market value."

"All right, Anthony," said Mallender, as he returned the precious documents, "Colonel Tallboys knows you, and that is the main thing."

"Oh, yes, saar, and *I* know the Colonel, since I was a *chokra*, and can speak plenty well of him. That very good gentlemans, all servants liking him; though very quick, quick, quick, and particular; getting always all shirts washed in England—three dozen going, three dozen coming, three dozen wearing!"

"That will do, that will do," sternly interrupted his new master. "Don't *talk*. I am going to Guindy

to-morrow early, call me at five sharp, and order the car for half-past," and Anthony was temporarily silenced, and suppressed.

The hint of the General's premature arrival accelerated Mallender's movements. He was the very first to appear in the vast drawing-room, and had now an opportunity of making a leisurely survey of its contents. He did not fail to notice the great chunam pillars—gleaming like white marble—the polished teak floors, Eastern rugs, carefully placed screens, and profusion of delicately scented flowers; the whole atmosphere exhaled a cultivated taste, and subdued magnificence. What particularly struck the stranger was the accumulation of old furniture; objects he recognised from seeing their counterparts in great houses—or indeed in a lesser degree, his own. Here were chairs, mirrors, settees, and cabinets—enclosing curiosities and old china. Mallender was no judge, but realised that he was surrounded by many rare and valuable treasures, and was in the act of examining a cabinet, when he caught the sound of soft rustling, a light footstep, and turning about saw his hostess approaching. She carried herself well, and wore a pale yellow gown, with diamonds shining in her dark hair. Who would recognise in this dignified matron, the Fanny Bond of Martello Terrace, Tranmere?

"Oh, so you are the first!" she exclaimed. "This *is* nice—I'm so glad, for now we can have a little talk before the crowd arrive."

Mrs. Tallboys was sincerely pleased with Fred's cousin—a handsome young fellow with easy manners, and a pleasant manly voice. There was something chivalrous in his air, as well as his amazing enterprise; how well he looked in admirably cut evening clothes!

"Come and sit by me on this sofa," indicating a place, "and let us get to know one another better."

As he accepted her invitation, she added with a significant smile:

"Fred has told me all about you: I am quite what is called 'in the know,' and I can keep a secret."

"What do you think of my venture ?" he enquired.

"It's the most generous and romantic I've ever known, resembling, though in a different spirit, the impulse that carried the flower of England to the Crusades; but I'm afraid you will have the same ending—failure."

"Ah, I'm sorry to see you won't encourage me, Mrs. Tallboys."

"You are to call me Fanny; you and Fred are cousins, and cousins hold on to one another out here. Now I want to tell you, that as long as you are in India you are to look upon our house as your head-quarters—and home."

"Oh, thank you—you are most awfully kind, but I must not settle down to enjoy myself, until I've accomplished what you call my crusade."

"At any rate, you need not embark yet awhile! Surely you can spare us a few weeks ?" Then diplomatically changing the subject, "I saw you looking at my china and curios !"

"Yes, I'm no judge, but you seem to have a wonderful collection."

"You will call it more wonderful still, when you hear that every object you see—they are all dear to me—has been picked up in the Madras Presidency! Oh, yes, you may well stare; and now I'll tell you all about it. Once upon a time—say a hundred and fifty years ago, and even before then—furniture and household goods were imported from England, France, and Holland, by merchants, nabobs, or military adventurers—all more or less rich. As time advanced, those palmy days passed, and the Victorian Age dawned; old, so-called 'rubbish' went out of fashion and fell into disgrace. The new craze had not set in thirty years ago, and you could pick up treasures that it makes my mouth water to think of, in the thieving bazaar, or at Franck's auction rooms in the Mount Road."

"Yes, but you were not here thirty years ago—you were in a perambulator," objected her listener.

"No," she corrected, "a pigtail! I am forty-two. However, Fred was on the spot; even as a young sub. he had a taste for old things. He was well laughed at and called a muff, and an old woman, but he had quite a nice little collection, when *I* came on the scene. That lovely Empire couch, he rescued from being chopped up for firewood—the poor thing had only two legs. The Chippendale chairs, he routed out of a mouldy old bungalow on the top of Palaveram Hill. I discovered that charming satinwood table, in a *dirzee's* shop of Blacktown; some of the furniture has made journeys all over the Presidency on bullock-carts when regiments were on the move, and has been battered and cracked and auctioned over and over again, for nearly two centuries!"

"Then I wonder there is a stick left!" exclaimed Mallender.

"Well, yes; of course, some invaluable treasures have gone to boil cooltie, or gram, but many fine seasoned travellers still survive. My collection is my craze, my chief weakness, and my tongue once started cannot stop; every bit has its own history. Those Sèvres vases I bought from a Toda in the Hills; that ugly gilt jar in the same cabinet, I purchased as an act of charity from a beggar, a poor Eurasian woman, and gave her twenty rupees—believing it was brass. Long afterwards it turned out to be solid gold—a bit of loot from Seringapatam. I tried to trace the woman, but she had disappeared. That priceless vase of 'Sang de Bœuf' held pipe-clay in my back verandah! The exquisite dessert service you will eat off to-night, I unearthed at the back of Hadji Kareem's shop in Bangalore, smothered under years of dust, and I'd be *ashamed* to tell you what I paid for it! I have also a marvellous talisman—oh! I think I hear a motor! Would you mind turning on the light in the big chandelier—another find—tell you about it afterwards. I only have it lit at the last moment, as I cannot endure the glare."

Mallender rose to obey, and the splendid old French

piece instantly burst into a blaze that flooded the entire room, and seemed to appropriately herald the approach of a dark-eyed lady, wearing a shimmering gown of blue and silver, and a long rope of pearls—who thus made an involuntary, but impressive stage entrance.

For a moment she halted, and put her hand to her eyes, then murmured with a plaintive smile:

"I declare I am quite dazzled!"

"So are we!" responded Mrs. Tallboys with flattering significance. "Lena, let me introduce Captain Mallender; Geoffrey, this is my old friend Mrs. Villars, who is spending the cold weather with us. You are to take her in to dinner—your seats are on the left."

Here the arrival of the General, his wife and his A.D.C., cut short further explanation. The remainder of the company rapidly poured in, and as Mallender stood by his partner watching the crowd, he was struck by the elegance of the ladies' frocks, their fashionable air, and their diamonds; among men, the military element predominated; from the General's scarlet and bemedalled coat, to uniforms of sombre rifle green or gorgeous Indian cavalry—altogether a gay and goodly gathering.

When the very last couple had overwhelmed their hostess with apologies, a tall turbaned butler, picturesque in white and gold, entered, and with a profound salaam announced:

"Dinner is served!"

CHAPTER VI

Captain Mallender and his partner formed up into the Noah's Ark procession—headed by Colonel Tallboys and the General's wife—and presently found themselves in a room corresponding in height and size to the one they had just quitted, and steered successfully into their respective places at an oval table, glittering with crystal and silver and embellished by exquisite flowers and fruit. In the background stood a row of

well-drilled attendants, commanded and marshalled by the gold and white butler.

The new-comer noted the dainty appointments and careful details, painted menus, crested Venetian glass, and three superb epergnes—surely these had not been rescued from some filthy go-down? As he withdrew his gaze, he encountered the glorious eyes of his companion.

"Rather nice, isn't it?" she murmured; "you see, we are quite up-to-date out here."

"Quite," he agreed.

"By the way, when did you arrive?"

"Last night—from Bombay."

"And how are all the dear old folks at home?"

"More or less cold and coughing—it's been a hard winter."

"And you came out to escape from it?" she questioned.

"Well—not exactly," he answered, after a momentary hesitation.

"Would it be too, *too* rude, to enquire what *did* bring you?"

Mallender found it impossible to impart to this charming lady, with the soft voice and alluring eyes, the real, true, and only reason, for his presence in the country. As he looked back at her, he realised how ridiculous and preposterous his errand would appear.

"My house is under repair"—sudden happy thought—"and I really am without a roof!"

"Then you are a wanderer like myself," she exclaimed. "I have spent eight months in India, and I must soon be thinking of 'Home, sweet Home.'"

"And no doubt your husband—but, of course, he is with you——" Mallender stopped short; in an illuminating flash he recognised his blunder. The lady's face had suddenly stiffened, her expression undergone a curious change. She looked away for a moment, and then, still looking away, let fall the deliberate words:

"I am a widow."

"Oh, I say! I do beg your pardon," he pleaded impetuously. "I'm most frightfully sorry—I—er—I did not know——"

"Oh, how could you?" she interrupted; "in a country where grass widows abound, a real widow is almost unknown. I suppose you are out for the usual thing—to shoot big game?"

"No, I'm only out—er—just to have a look round."

Here, alas, was another lie!

"Ah, a looker-on, something like myself; since my loss, I have just looked on—and envied happier people."

Mallender glanced at the fair speaker; she wore no outward sign of woe, not even a mourning ring; he noticed her expressive hands, blazing with diamonds, the studied perfection of her toilet; at the moment she was thoughtfully scanning the menu, and he had an excellent opportunity of critically observing her extraordinary good looks; the long black lashes, resting on a delicate cheek, smooth as ivory; the chiselled nose, clean-cut lips, and masses of dark auburn hair—which exhaled a faint, and exquisite perfume.

"I've been up north, and to Simla and Calcutta," she resumed, when she had replaced the menu with a little contented sigh, "and then I came down to Madras to see dear old Fanny. I arrived three months ago—and feel *rooted!*"

Mallender's raised brows indicated his amazement.

"Yes, I like this poor despised old city and its ways," here she cast a glance round the circle of guests, the band of well-trained servants, the delicacies that were being offered, and the champagne that, like a popular novel, was enjoying a brisk circulation.

"I do love it; it's all so leisurely and so comfortable. Give *me* comfort, and I ask no more!"

"Comfort!" thought her listener; "if this is merely comfort, what can be her idea of luxury?"

"I appreciate the large houses," she continued "the food, the servants, who all speak English; though,

of course, no stretch of imagination can give Madras a cold weather ! "

" No, I understand that this is their winter," rejoined Mallender, " and to-day, you could have fried an egg on the roof of my *gharry*."

" Yes, I daresay, and yet I like Madras. My father was born out here, and his father served most of his life in the Presidency—there must be something in heredity."

" I believe there is no doubt of that. Do you happen to know the old man opposite, who is staring so fixedly ? "

" Oh, yes, Sir William Bream, a connection of Fanny's ; enormously rich, and immensely interested in cotton."

" I thought for a moment that he was immensely interested in us—or rather, I should say, in you."

" Oh," spreading out her hand with a gesture of sudden confidence, " he generally sits beside me—we are rather pals."

" The young lady next to him looks ill," observed Mallender, as he glanced at a pale, thin girl with sunken eyes, and a frock that had seen its best days.

" You mean Miss Sim ; I don't think she is ill—only miserable." Mrs. Villars helped herself to a salted almond, nibbled it daintily, and then added unconcernedly, " You see, she has no belongings—and no home."

" How does she happen to be out here ? "

" I fancy she had a pretty dull time in England, and they do say, snatched at an invitation to Bombay, you know, one of those vague things, that mean *nothing !* She contrived to get a passage, and presented herself before the horrified people as a staying—not paying—guest ! Naturally, they passed her on, and she has been passing on ever since, like the Queen in Old Maid," and unfeeling Mrs. Villars gave a low amused laugh.

" But why doesn't she go home ? " enquired Mallender.

"For the simple reason that she has no money."

"Poor girl!" he muttered. "What an awful situation!"

"Yes, isn't it?" the lady assented. "I'm afraid she's a dreadful sponge, and not particularly interesting —let us talk of something else. Do you notice the man near the end, with the fine head and beard? He is Rolf, the celebrated artist, who has come out to paint the Rajah of Gondalcond, and various other native nobles."

"Yes, I think I've seen his pictures in the Academy."

"I wonder if you saw *my* picture there last year—painted by Le Grande?"

"No, I'm sure I did not," and he smiled significantly.

"Because you would remember it—oh, yes!" and she showed her pretty teeth.

"Was it a great success?"

"Yes, absolutely; not merely as a work of art, and a marvellous likeness, but you know they say Le Grande has some mysterious psychical power, and can discover and expose startling deficiencies, or unsuspected traits, in the characters of his sitters," then, leaning a little nearer, and looking up into Mallender's eyes, she dropped her voice to a whisper, and breathed, "as for myself—he has painted my *soul!*"

"What! You don't say so, how extraordinary!" stammered her companion, not a little amazed. "I should like to see the picture—where is it?"

"Oh, Sir William bought it; it was a commission of his. I believe the price was fabulous"; then, in quite a different key, "do have some of this delicious iced asparagus!"

As Mrs. Villars conversed on various subjects, Mallender gathered that his beautiful neighbour was a woman of wide travel and experience, well-versed in all the social jargon of the day. Scotch moors, Norwegian fishings, foreign spas, had in turn been illuminated by her presence—and it was evident from her talk that she was as rich and extravagant as she was

lovely and fascinating. There was a temporary silence as she helped herself to a dish, and a gay voice on his left addressed him.

The voice belonged to a lady who had preceded him to the dining-room; he had noticed her slim, graceful figure, and well-set-on head, with its coils of dark hair; the countenance now turned to him, though full of force and life, was disappointingly plain; it displayed a large mouth, a too *retroussé* nose, and a pair of wide-open grey eyes.

"I've been longing to get in a word edgeways," she began; "but now that Major de Lacey has captured the ear of a woman who usually obliterates the rest of the company, here is *my* chance! Let me introduce myself; I am Mrs. Brander, *née* Nancy Bond. Mrs. Tallboys is my aunt, and since Freddy is your relative, we are some sort of connection—shall we say twenty-first cousins?" and she looked at him persuasively.

"I shall be only too delighted, and proud," he answered with a bow.

"I was exported to Fan years ago, and she married me off—wasn't she clever?" As Mrs. Brander asked the question, her grey eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Clever?" repeated Mallender; "I don't quite know what you mean?"

"Clever because I'm so ugly!" was the brisk rejoinder. "Do you realise that your lot has been cast between a celebrated beauty, and the opposite extreme?"

"Come, I can't allow you to say that!" he protested uncomfortably.

"Well, of course, some of us must be plain, as foils to show off the others; if everyone were handsome, think how dull it would be! Tom, that is my husband, is accustomed to me, and my nose has always been a source of amusement to my family."

Mallender, who was at a complete loss for words, merely stared, as she rattled on.

"I am spending a holiday with Aunt Fan—I've come for a bit of the season."

"I hope you will enjoy it," he said lamely.

"Thank you, I'm blessed with the enjoying temperament, and have an infinite capacity for taking pleasure—in short, a very frivolous inferior sort of person, you are not married I believe?"

"No."

"You said that No, as if you were most truly thankful, but wait, Aunt Fanny loves match-making, and if you are not very clever and *cunning*, she will soon dispose of you!"

"She won't have a chance," he answered, "I'm off, the moment the polo tournament is over."

"Are you really?" and she gazed at him interrogatively. "Well, Aunt Fan can do great things in a week. Of course this is your first visit to India?"

"No, I was up in the North-west, eight years ago."

"At school?"

"I am older than you suppose. I joined the Warlocks at Lucknow, and after a couple of months had a bad go of typhoid, and was sent home. However, the regiment followed next reliefs."

"They *must* have been attached to you!" she exclaimed with an air of grave conviction.

Mallender burst into a spontaneous laugh, then he said:

"And now here I am, in the benighted Presidency!"

"May I give you one little hint?" she whispered.

"A dozen—twenty dozen."

"Never say a word against Madras to Freddy, or he will boil over! He is an infatuated Madrassi; talks very big of Clive, Charnock, Warren Hastings—and his lady friend, Mrs. Anna Maria Imhoff, who lived in his house at the Mount; also of Yale in the Fort, and others, precisely as if they were all here to-day! He is so jealous, for the old, old, original Presidency, and loves every temple, and toddy tree, between this and Ceylon. I won't ask what you think of us *yet*."

"No, you must give me a longer start than one day; however, I have experienced your wind and dust—both horrible!"

"Admitted," she answered with a nod, "but we Britons need not give ourselves airs, for it is a well-known historical fact, that the Romans fled out of our country, because they couldn't stand the climate!"

"Mrs. Brander, you are the latest from school, so I dare not presume to argue, but hitherto I have been under the impression, that an incursion of the Huns, recalled the legions."

"Well, don't let us quarrel over such a trifle," she rejoined with a shrug. "This is your first dinner in Madras—I wonder what strikes you particularly?"

"I'm afraid you'll be shocked, and think I'm frightfully greedy, when I answer, the *dinner* itself! We might be at the 'Ritz,' or Buckingham Palace."

"Oh, I see you are not aware that this old city is celebrated for its cuisine, and Sunday tiffins. The native is a born cook, and our French predecessors instilled into him some very sound ideas, with respect to sauces, soups, *soufflés*, and omelettes. No doubt, formerly, the nabob who lived here, regaled himself and friends on rich food, mountainous *pilaws*, and molten curries. Those days are gone; also the times when the very boldest woman dared not enter that chamber of horrors, —her cookhouse."

"Why?"

"For fear of what she might discover! I pass over the story of 'master's sock,' and other well-authenticated details. The hand of the butler no longer inscribes a startling menu, and you are spared the alarming promise of 'Cold Roast Lion, and D——d Turkey'!"

"Oh, come, I say!" ejaculated Mallender.

"I could tell you of still worse items, but *nous avons changé tout cela*. Now, the menu is in French, and the food is of the daintiest description. To me, the best of it all is, that the sudden incursion of half a dozen unexpected guests at a moment's notice has no appreciable effect on the *chef's* temper! Everything comes up to time, and there is neither fuss nor skimping. I may whisper to you, that it is a good thing to encourage

your cook, put him on his mettle, and, so to speak, *lard* him with flattery! So much for cooks, and for their employers! I suppose you know scarcely any of the present company?"

"No, but I'll be most grateful for information. I've made one awful blunder already."

"Oh, have you! Do tell me all about it?" she asked eagerly.

Seldom had Mallender seen a face of such gay animation; for all its snub nose, it was more piquante, attractive, and vivid, than that of many a placid beauty. As he merely smiled, and shook his head, she continued: "Then I'll be generous, and tell you what happened to *me*, at my first Indian dinner-party. I was sent in with a young man—fairer than either of us. He was just out from home, and made himself agreeable, and when I enquired if he knew any of the guests? and he said 'yes,' I immediately indicated two women opposite, and said, 'they are as black as my ayah, who are they?' and he promptly replied, 'The stout lady is my grandmother—the thin one, my mother.'

"I shrieked with laughter, at what I took to be a joke; but when at the end of the evening I saw him march away, arm in arm with the fat dark lady, I nearly fainted."

"I don't wonder," said Mallender. "Thanks to you, I am now warned, and shall ask no questions."

"Then shall I take your questions for granted, and point out some of the company? The man opposite is Sir William Bream—isn't he like an old sea-lion? So large and inflated, with great dull eyes, and a beard."

"Yes, and since you bring the Zoo to dinner, may I ask you to tell me about the long-necked, long-nosed man, whose self-contained air recalls my dear friend the King Penguin?"

"That is Mr. Arnfield, a prominent member of the Bar, and the local dramatic society. His elocution is marvellous, and on Sundays, he always reads the lessons;

one morning, he upset the whole congregation, when at the end of the second lesson, he slammed the Bible, and announced in a stentorian voice, 'Now Borrobas was —*a rabbit!*' I do hope, you are not shocked, are you? I am too thankful I did not happen to be in church, for I know I should have disgraced myself, and been ignominiously removed by the verger."

"And I should have joined you!—kindly continue your valuable information.

"Well, the little elderly lady with a face like a piece of wash-leather, lemon-coloured hair, and diamonds, is Mrs. Fiske, widely known as 'The Acidulated Drop.' Her chief talent is fiction."

"Oh, yes, I understand—a novelist."

"Not exactly—though she achieves distinction by the number and variety of her stories. Her late husband had a fine appointment, and she has a fine pension; her daughters are satisfactorily settled out here, she infests the Hills, and knows everything that goes on—on Hills or plains; can do a kind action, or the reverse; and is always prepared to get you a servant, or give you a character!"

"A useful acquaintance!" observed Mallender, glancing at the lady; "and rich—judging by her diamonds."

"Yes, she has heaps of money, and eggs in many baskets; shares in shops, and mines, and coffee estates. I see that she has noticed *you* and soon your history, prospects, and reputation, will be at her mercy."

"I don't mind, I have no prospects now," he replied; "and as for my reputation, reputations are cheap! I can easily get another."

"Easier said than done—mud always sticks! To go on with my little serial, the handsome lady in pink is the Hon. Mrs. Cliffe. She is ruffled, because she has just discovered that rank has no precedence in India. *I* go in before her, as a consort of a Heaven-born; and she is told off, according to Cocker, as the wife of a Captain in the Line. How I should love to read her

letters by the next mail! The matron with the beautiful white hair, and emeralds, is Mrs. Damer, who has come out to see her two sons; one is in the Army—the other is in Tea. The stern man on her right, is said to be our future great General—mark his cold, relentless eye!"

"Well, he looks a hard-bitten chap, and every inch a soldier; and the pretty, fair girl lower down—why is *she* sent in with that old buffer whose collar is choking him? That cannot be according to Cocker!"

"No, but it happens to be a very special case," rejoined Mrs. Brander with impressive gravity; "Miss Miller has been paired off with Colonel Harris, because she is going to be married to him."

"Marry him!" repeated Mallender, setting down his untasted glass. "Why, he might be her grandfather!"

"No doubt," agreed Mrs. Brander, "but there are reasons for the match; if you will bend forward, and look along this side, you may notice a sharp powdered nose, poked well to the front—it belongs to the chief reason—the girl's mother, I will show her to you later."

"Thank you," he answered dryly, "your description is sufficient."

"At any rate, you will recognise Mrs. Miller by a glaring mass of dyed hair, topped by a jaunty green feather. Colonel Miller's time is up, and he will soon be retired, and go home. He and his wife have led a merry life for years, they are heavily in debt—so Mrs. Miller says—and they have barely enough for two people to live on, much less three. She is therefore determined to get rid of Barbie, her daughter; I am sure she longed to put her in her auction list, 'One charming and amiable girl, aged nineteen; hair and complexion guaranteed; no reasonable offer refused.' You see how spiteful I can be!"

"But what does the young lady say?" enquired Mallender, as he glanced at a pretty young thing, with a small wistful face, and clouds of light brown hair.

"The young lady dare not have *any* opinion; she

only came out a year ago, and has not had much of a time. Barbie is popular, and rather a dear, but her mother scares everyone by her almost bloodthirsty hunt for a son-in-law. The poor child is terribly handicapped by her parents ; a rackety mother, and a gambling father ; I must say, I am sorry for poor little Barbie."

" So am I," echoed Mallender ; " is there no escape ? "

" No, though she has a staunch friend in Aunt Fan, whose two manias are, young girls, and old furniture. Aunt Fan has done her level best, but I'm afraid that nothing short of the end of the world, can save Barbie from becoming Mrs. Harris."

" Miserable victim ! "

" Well, yes—and no. Colonel Harris is a kind old thing, except at bridge, when he is like a dissatisfied turkey-cock. Of course, there will be no ' love's young dream ! ' "

Mallender gave a loud involuntary laugh.

" Don't laugh so scornfully," expostulated Mrs. Brander. " The girl will have a good home, no money cares, possibly a motor—and certainly a comfortable widow's pension."

" Oh, ye gods ! " ejaculated her listener. " Fancy a girl marrying for a widow's pension. Twenty-first cousin, how *can* you suggest such a thing ? "

" You may well ask ! I have a darling little daughter of my own, asleep in her cot upstairs ; sooner than she should make such a match, I'd—well, I adore Babs, and Mrs. Miller has never attempted to conceal her aversion to Barbie ! "

At this moment Mrs. Villars turned to claim her partner.

" I do hope you play bridge ? " she murmured in her sweet contralto.

" Oh, yes, rather ; but I'm a bit out of practice."

" We are sure to have bridge to-night, and if so, do come to my table, and if you are very rusty, I won't scold you—*much*." As she gazed at him, with an expression at once cajoling and caressing, Mallender,

stirred by the enchantment of her plaintive voice and marvellous eyes, promptly answered:

"All right, Mrs. Villars, I'll play at your table—even if to reach it I have to trample on the slain."

"Ah, I see that we shall be great friends," she continued, "we are both fond of travelling, and devotees of bridge and golf. Don't you think when people like the same things—they like one another?"

"I am sure of it," he answered with emphasis.

"I see Fan has collected eyes," exclaimed Mrs. Villars, rising as she spoke. "*Au revoir*, and mind you don't forget about the bridge," she added with a confidential smile.

Mrs. Villars wore a marvellous shimmering gown, an air of easy and assured self-confidence, and as she swept away with a dragging grace of movement, Mallender realised that there went a lady habitually accustomed to admiration, homage, and wealth.

CHAPTER VII

The ladies—sixteen in number—streamed forlornly into the drawing-room, where they broke up into groups—like gravitating to like. The General's wife and Mrs. Tallboys embarked on congenial topics, local charities, and an imminent bazaar; the wearer of the jaunty green feather was captured by Mrs. Fiske, eager to hear the latest news of Barbie's prospects. Barbie and Miss Sim, drawn to one another by mutual sympathy, left the room together, to seek a secluded corner of the verandah, and popular Nancy Brander on her way to a beckoning friend was waylaid by her recent neighbour.

"Do stop and talk to *me* for a moment!" urged Mrs. Villars, leading her aside. "I want to ask your opinion of my new frock?"

"*Ravissante! Ravissante!*" pronounced Nancy, throwing up her hands. After a pause she added: "I must confess that my chief sentiment is *envy!*"

"It arrived to-day from Mervéille—there is nothing,' complacently viewing herself in a long mirror, "like a well-cut new gown for giving a woman an air of superiority—is there?"

"Do you feel so superior?" enquired Mrs. Brander in a bantering voice. "No doubt there *is* something in what you say. I certainly feel twice as important in a pair of Morkoph's smart shoes as I do in my wobbly goloshes!"

"Good gracious, fancy wearing them!"

"Fancy *not* wearing them in the rains," rejoined Nancy. "I expect your superior gown cost a pretty penny."

"No; they let me have two for ninety."

"Rupees or guineas?"

"Nan, you are really *too* bad! I call this cheap for fifty—look at the embroidery, all hand-made—real Mechlin lace—and then the cut!"

"It is not my idea of economy. I never give more than fifteen—and times are so bad."

"But if people only buy frumpish gowns that cost a few pounds—what *is* to become of the poor tradespeople?"

"Perhaps they may be better off—and have less bad debts," suggested Nancy.

Mrs. Villars coloured guiltily, but instantly recovering her aplomb, said: "I declare your black gown has quite a French effect—where did it come from?"

"My verandah."

"*Dirzee* made! Never! I simply refuse to believe you. Nan, this is one of your jokes?"

"A joke I cut out with my own hands. I'm full of ideas, and my man is an artist. I have good models, too—Fanny's best; and now and then I get a box out from home."

"But why this miserable economy? your husband's pay, your own fortune——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mrs. Brander, "but there are plenty of calls on one's purse, besides spending money on chiffons."

"Are there? I don't think a woman can invest her coin to better advantage than in making herself a pleasure to behold."

"And you would still be that, even if you wore nothing but a blanket and a string of beads."

This verdict was all the more flattering because unwillingly bestowed.

"Really, Nancy," and the beauty laughed, "I hope I may not be reduced to a single garment!—but one never can tell. I am over head and ears in debt."

"And yet you spend ninety guineas at one swoop!"

"Yes, my dear,—debt is like drink. You go on, and on, and on. The more you spend—the more you drink—the tighter the thing takes hold of you! By the way, I was really forgetting something I wanted to ask. What do you think of him?"

"Him?" repeated Mrs. Brander, "which him? We have so many hims this evening, hims ancient and modern!"

"Don't be silly. I mean the nice boy that sat between us at dinner, and by the way, darling, you poached shamelessly!"

"Oh, you mean Captain Mallender. I like him."

"What were you so busy talking about?"

"Let me see," putting her hand to her forehead, "the climate, the ancient Britons, and the Zoo."

"You are always so blue and cultured," declared Mrs. Villars. "I think Captain Mallender very good-looking: such a cheery manner, such gay dark eyes, and a boyish smile; he parts his hair just as I like it! Fan asked me to take charge of him, and be extra nice."

"And so you were! You are always nice—to men," corrected Nancy, with a disarming smile. "You know he is Fred's cousin, out from home."

"And where *is* his home? What is it like?"

"The photo is in Fred's sanctum, a lovely old Jacobean place standing in a great park."

" So this good-looking boy is rich ! "

Nancy nodded.

" And how long is he going to stay ? "

" Oh, the usual time—as long as ever he likes."

" I wonder what has brought him out ? Says he does not shoot, what can it be ? "

" Perhaps to search for a wife ? " gaily suggested Mrs. Brander.

" As if a man in *his* position would look at an Indian spin ! " rejoined Mrs. Villars with withering scorn.

" He might do worse," argued the other briskly. " We have a large assortment of really pretty girls, quite fresh and dainty—nothing shop soiled ! "

" Really, Nancy, what dreadful things you do say ! and if you call any girl in Madras pretty—*I* don't." As Mrs. Villars concluded, she turned and surveyed herself in the glass, and Nancy Brander thus released effected her escape.

Lena Villars was a shallow, more or less amiable woman, endowed by nature with a lovely face, perfect health, and perennial youth—but stinted in the matter of heart and brain, and with a moral outlook that was somewhat oblique.

She appreciated luxury, had a consuming passion for clothes, and was absolutely devoid of the money sense. Her chief interest in life was the attitude of men towards herself, and she cherished an inexorable resolution to be first, or nowhere.

After gazing exhaustively at her own charming reflection, the beauty stole away to her room, there to repair some little flaws in her toilet previous to the great business of the evening.

Meanwhile, in a remote corner of the verandah, the two girl friends were exchanging miserable confidences in low voices.

" Mother has taken *two* passages in the Bibby Line for the first week in April," said Barbie Miller. " There is no money to pay for mine—if there were, it would make no difference. She says it's providential that

Colonel Harris wishes to marry me, and considers me extraordinarily lucky."

"And what do you say, Barbie?"

"You know very well, Ada. I am still holding out, though the announcement of my engagement has been sent home. I'm afraid Colonel Harris has offered to pay for my trousseau, and I know that he has 'settled' quite a lot of things, including one or two big bills, and given mother a lovely diamond ring. Really, he is most generous; and if he did not want to *marry* me, I'd like him well enough! I overheard mother telling Mrs. Fiske that the wedding is to take place in the Cathedral early one morning, and we are to start immediately afterwards for the Shevaroy Hills. Honestly, I could not feel more wretched if I were going to be hanged—indeed, I don't think I'd mind!"

"I only wish I had your chance," declared her companion with energy, "I'd marry Colonel Harris like a shot!"

"Oh, *Ada!*" and Barbie stared incredulously.

"Yes, you don't know what it is to be alone in the world, and penniless," declared her friend forcibly; "he, at least, could give me a roof over my head, and a home. Your case is nothing as compared to mine; I am really in despair. I've not enough money to pay the dhoby, or put in the collection plate, or buy stamps. My clothes are so mended and so shabby I am ashamed to be seen. All the same, I don't think anyone but Mrs. Brander guesses that I am so absolutely destitute. Last time she was here she insisted on lending me a hundred rupees—such a boon!—she said she knew what little odds and ends a girl on her own wanted, and I was to pay her any time; and she gave me a lovely hat, because it did not suit her, and several pairs of gloves, because they were too small, and an evening-gown, because her husband could not bear it! For all her funny talk, she is a darling—just like Mrs. Tallboys."

"Does *she* not know that you are so hard up, Ada?"

"No, and I try to keep it from her. She has been only too kind; she paid my railway ticket down to Calicut, and sent an ayah with me. This is my second visit here, she invited me for a month, and I've stayed two. I feel such a worm, and so deadly ashamed. Mrs. Fiske enquired if I was living here altogether, and said 'this house should be called Hooper's Hotel.'"

"How horrid—and how like her!"

"I know that my room is wanted for Captain Mallender," continued Ada, "the ayah told me so. I've asked the Bells at Coimbatore to take me in, but they made an excuse. Now I've written to the Carsons at Trichy—they are my very *last* hope. I've no money, and nothing to sell. I sold the pretty frock Nancy Brander gave me—a sergeant's wife offered twenty-five rupees for it; the ayah took ten for commission, and I've told such stories about the gown to Nancy! But poor people *have* to lie! All I have left are three rupees. I'm so unhappy, so worn out with anxiety and shame, that I wish I were dead! I'd drown myself, only there is no place to do it in—the Cooum is filthy, and off the pier there are sharks!"

"Dear, dear, old Ada," said her companion, stroking her arm, "if I could only bring myself to marry Colonel Harris, you should come and live with *me*. I am as poor as a church mouse, but I can easily let you have ten rupees—and you must, and shall take it! It will at least pay for wires, and stamps, and be a little help in putting you in communication with friends, who might invite you."

"Friends," echoed Ada, "I've none; those I had are thoroughly sick of me, and no wonder. I'm not pretty, or amusing, or accomplished, I don't play bridge for money, I'm not even good-tempered. Just a plain, stupid bore. They say that the poor always help the poor—and it's true—but I won't take your ten rupees, Barbie."

Seeing that Barbie was about to protest, she hurried on:

"Do explain one thing, which puzzles me. Why

is Colonel Harris so anxious to marry you, when he, and all the world, must see how you hang back ? "

" Why ?—because of the hanging back ! Mother tells him I'm so shy and timid, such a mere shrinking child, afraid to show my *real* feelings—and he believes her. I won't call him James, and I won't allow kissing, nor will I accept presents. I beg him to give them to me—afterwards."

" Do you think there will be an afterwards ? "

" Ada," she drew a long sigh, " I hope not, but you know I am no match for mother ; she is so fiercely determined, so cruel, and so strong. Now listen to me, I'm going to say something dreadful—I almost wish I had been born an orphan, and if mother does go home, and leaves me behind, I hope I may never, never, see her again. Oh," springing up, " she is calling me—the men have come in, and I must fly ! "

Presently there were sounds of music in the drawing-room, and if Ada Sim had accompanied her companion —instead of sitting sobbing in a corner of the verandah —she would have heard Mrs. Brander give a superb rendering of Chopin. Subsequently poor Barbie was driven to the Grand Schiedmayer, where with cold and trembling fingers she proceeded to murder Schumann—fortunately not a soul was listening ; almost everyone's attention was riveted on the bridge tables so seductively set forth ; with their adequate complement of chairs and cards they seemed to summon the company to " come and play."

Mrs. Villars beckoned airily to her new friend, and said :

" I hear from Captain Byng that he has roped you in for polo, he is *so* pleased."

" I am afraid his pleasure is a bit premature ! " rejoined Mallender. " I am out of practice, and I believe some of the competing teams are first-rate."

" You mean the Marauders. Colonel Molyneux's lot ? "

" Yes, and the Motagherry Planters ; though only

two or three pony men play a very hot game, so do the Bluebottles."

"I shall come and look on at the practice, and wave my sunshade and scream '*Shabash!*' only they don't say that down here. Ah, they are moving at last! Do let us cut in, with the General and Nancy Brander."

The General's weather-beaten countenance was a study in satisfaction, when Mrs. Brander fell to his lot as a partner, for her play was famous. Here was a lady who made no mistakes, never lost her head, and knew the history of every card. Their opponents were Captain Mallender, and Mrs. Villars,—who made a delightful picture, as she dealt out the pack with flying jewelled fingers. At first, all the best of the red suits seemed to fall to her and her partner. By and by, the luck turned, the fortunate couple were slammed once and again; the lady made reckless declarations in the true gambler's spirit, ever hoping to retrieve her luck—and lost the rubber, and fifty rupees.

Occasionally Mallender, when "dummy," rose and strolled about the room, exchanging remarks and experiences with his fellow-dummies, and glancing at various other tables. At one of these sat Mrs. Fiske, grumbling incessantly, and bewailing her ill-luck in a manner that was maddening to her companions.

"Never had such luck—this isn't a hand—it's a foot! Don't know what it is to hold a card—nothing but Yarboughs, and Chicane—perfectly *sickening!*"

The serious, stern, and business-like bridgers, such as the future great General, Freddy Tallboys, and Mrs. Damer, played "auction" with grim concentration; here was no whining, no court-martial on indifferent partners. Nothing, nothing, but what Sarah Battle loved, "the rigour of the game." At another table sat Sir William Bream, Mrs. Tallboys, Colonel Harris and Miss Miller. Unhappy girl! her present (and future) partner, found it impossible to conceal his emotion when she trumped his best diamond, and led straight away

into the enemy's suit! It is conceded that cards develop one's real disposition, and expose our worst failings; such as envy, jealousy, tyranny, ingratitude, meanness, avarice, and cowardice. Mallender glanced over at Colonel Harris. His face was a deep plum—quite dangerously inflamed; how his great thick neck seemed to swell and bulge over the stiff staff collar! Then the looker-on moved round and stood behind Miss Barbie; he noted her flickering colour, and tremulous lips, as she fumbled with her cards—uncertain what to play. He longed to give her a quiet hint, as she hesitated between a king and a nine; meanwhile her *vis-à-vis* shuffled his feet impatiently, and her adversaries exchanged significant smiles. As Mallender watched the irresolute girl, he noticed her wealth of beautiful hair, her slender, graceful neck, cheap white frock, and thin silver bangles. Her small childish hands were ringless—apparently, as yet, there was no engagement. He moved away to his own place, just in time to escape the explosion of wrath which burst over the head of little Miss Miller. Of course, as he anticipated, she had played the wrong card, and lost both game and rubber. Bridge continued with unabated zeal till nearly one o'clock, when the General, remembering an early inspection, rose a well-pleased guest—and winner. Mallender and Mrs. Villars had lost ninety rupees, and as the latter gathered up her wisp of a lace handkerchief and little chain purse she said with a smile:

"Let us hope for better luck to-morrow, Captain Mallender! If you will pay the General,—I will settle with Mrs. Brander."

He noticed Mrs. Brander's amused and somewhat inscrutable expression as she collected her gloves and nodded a careless assent.

When the last guest had departed, the last motor hummed away, Mallender, as he followed Anthony and a lantern to his outdoor quarters, realised that this had indeed been an evening of many impressions! A little later, when Colonel Tallboys had locked up the

3†

cigars, he came bustling into his wife's room, and found her locking up her diamonds.

"Your usual success, Fan! The dinner was A1, the mutton hung to a second, and that new champagne is very sound."

"That is your department, my dear. Yes, I think everything went off well, and people enjoyed themselves."

"All except that unfortunate Miss Sim, who looked like a death's head—but then, she doesn't play bridge. I say, what about Geoffrey, eh? He got along all right. I'm glad to see that shyness is not one of his difficulties. Molyneux was much taken with him, but these Cavalry chaps always hang on to one another. After you left, he was a help, talking away to the General, and that shikari man; by the way, you've not said a word to anyone about the reason of his trip?"

"My dear Fred, need you ask!" and Mrs. Tallboys confronted him gravely. "I don't want people to suppose that there is insanity in your family!—not that Geoffrey is insane—he is merely obsessed with an idea. The poor romantic boy was too long alone at Mallender; his father's illness and death got on his nerves. He is naturally cheery, and the change out here, with lots of lively company, will effect a cure; he is a dear fellow, with such nice unaffected, courteous manners, and a bright open face."

"Oh!—I see he has been admiring your *china!*" declared Colonel Tallboys with a grin of comprehension.

"No; but I may tell you that I, like Colonel Molyneux, am 'much taken with him.'"

"And he with Mrs. Villars?"

"Yes, you noticed that, in spite of William's smothered wrath, I sent him in to dinner with Lena."

"A capital move. Though I thought William looked pretty sick! So you are bent upon strong measures?"

"I don't know what you call strong measures, but I had a little talk with Geoffrey. I realise that he is completely overmastered by one idea, and I am deter-

mined to do all I can to prevent his risking his whole fortune on a wild-goose chase."

"I understand. Between polo, and the beauty, you hope to get the better of this obsession, and to head him off from his crazy enterprise. Well, Fan, you and I will do our best; and as, of course, you have allowed Mary Ayah to retire to her go-down, I suppose I must put on my spectacles, and unlace your dress?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE following morning a sonorous "Five o'clock, saar," awoke Mallender from his too brief slumbers; his first struggling thought was "Where am I?" The cool crisp atmosphere felt strange, so did the sounds of an unknown tongue, and a stamping of impatient hoofs, in his immediate vicinity; then, in a second, he recalled his wits; he was in a tent in India, and pledged to play polo within an hour. A strong cup of Neilgherry tea, and a cold tub dispersed his drowsiness, and with the car's swift passage through the invigorating air his spirits and energies awoke. Lumbering water-carts were already allaying the red dust, and evoking a curious and unfamiliar smell of wet and pungent earth. From all directions people were sallying out for the morning ride or drive; portly cooks, attended by obsequious coolies (carrying empty baskets), flocked towards the bazaar, pallid Europe children were being herded forth on ponies, or in prams, in order to "eat the air," which, at this hour, was deliciously fresh, the sky incredibly clear and radiant, quivering with brightness and life. At six o'clock, all Madras was astir, and everywhere was activity, and bustle. As the smooth-running Napier sped noiselessly onward, Mallender looked about him, and realised that he was now in the tropics! Dense masses of purple Bourgainvillia draped and veiled the roadside bungalows; above their low brick walls, luxuriant bananas waved graceful, if some-

what dusty, leaves; "Sally Bidon" creeper and the scarlet gold mohur flung out their blazing signals. Vivid flocks of green paroquets—"the pretty dear" of barracks—flashed across from the banyans to the tulip trees, and tall toddy palms seemed to nod their heavy heads in languid greeting to the stranger, as he skimmed onwards, across the Marmelong Bridge, and away into the expanse of Guindy Park—where on the polo-ground Captain Byng and three smart polo ponies were awaiting him.

A subsequent practice proved fairly successful; the fourteen one waler ponies were well trained and handy. As Mallender galloped, and shouted, and wheeled, and hit, he was once more experiencing the *joie de vivre*, and feeling the sap of youth in his veins! Mallender Court and its melancholy memories were forgotten—as was also the great quest; that he had no other reason for coming to India than to play this uncommonly fast game, was 'number one's' firm (if momentary) conviction, as he rode off the Governor's Private Secretary, and scored the winning goal. This polo match at Guindy seemed to be a social spring-board, from which the new arrival took a headlong dive into the maelstrom of Madras society. He now appeared to live amid the whirl of engagements: golf, boating on the Adyar, hunting, paper-chasing, bridge or dinner-parties, and a dance almost every other night. Also he found friends in the regiment quartered in the Fort and among the artillery at the Mount, and was almost "snowed under" with invitations. As the Tallboys' relative, a popular and presentable young fellow, who played polo, bridge and golf, his company was in continual, and even anxious request. However, his cousin Fan had always the first claim, and a quiet evening at home, with music and bridge, with Mrs. Villars for his partner, was always an attraction. Mallender and the lady became, as she predicted, great friends; unfortunately it was a friendship that aroused Sir William Bream's ill-concealed jealousy, and wrath.

"What Mrs. Villars could see in that grinning young whipper-snapper?" was beyond the range of *his* intelligence! The substantial self-made man of sixty was insatiable in his demands for the lady's society, for her insidious and delicious flatteries, her company to play golf, or to motor about the neighbourhood.—He liked to be seen with the handsomest woman in Madras. —Sir William owned a magnificent car; also, it was whispered, thirty thousand a year.

Colonel Tallboys kept a first-class stable, riding was still his passion; every morning at an early hour he fared forth, accompanied by Nan on a fine black waler, and as many of his guests as he could induce to follow his example. If not hunting, or paper-chasing, they scoured the Island, rode on the Marina, or the old race-course, returning a gay and happy pack, to an elaborate *chota-hazri* awaiting them in the open verandah.

Mrs. Villars did not care for early rising—nor yet riding—although she liked to sit about in her becoming habit; occasionally she rode down to the Island of an evening on a well-exercised pony, proceeding at no greater pace than a hurried walk, as anything more rapid gave her a pain in the side; but to state the plain truth, the graceful widow was a trembling coward.

Every evening the beauty appeared in a different toilet—each outshining the last. Mallender never could decide which suited her the best? The black, the rose-colour, the smoke-grey, the white, or the primrose —Mrs. Villars looked lovely in them all! She consulted him frankly and artlessly on the subject of her wardrobe, discussed her frocks, hats, and wraps, with the fervour of an enthusiast. The lady also confided to him that she was too shockingly extravagant, and simply adored her clothes!

"Do tell me, which of all my gowns you prefer?" she enquired, looking at him with the gaze of an *ingénue*.

"The one you are wearing," was his gallant reply.

"You mean that as a compliment, but you must have a choice," she answered impatiently—the pair

were sitting in the verandah after dinner, enjoying coffee and cigarettes.

"Oh, well, if I must say, I choose the blue."

"The blue!" she repeated, "but why? Men *always* prefer black, or white."

"I like the blue, because you wore it the first time I saw you."

"Oh, you dear sentimental boy!" and Mrs. Villars extended a taper white hand, and patted his arm with playful commendation.

Nancy Brander, who happened to be in their neighbourhood, subsequently remarked to her aunt:

"I say, Fan, Lena Villars is making tremendous running with Geoffrey—he has given her a lovely gold bag for her birthday."

"Her birthday!" echoed Mrs. Tallboys, "rubbish—why, it's in October!"

"Yes, but perhaps to some it is convenient to have three or four a year; and when I was sitting out last evening, I declare I felt quite *de trop*—I expected every minute to see Geoffrey flop down on his knees, on the cold marble flags."

"Nonsense! How you talk, Nan!"

"Oh, yes, I can both talk and see. Tell me, dear, do you intend this case to develop? to go on to the end—I won't say bitter end—and marry Geoffrey to your *old* friend?"

"Of course I don't, you tiresome girl, and Lena would not think of him."

"You mean that she has other fish to fry—a big fish too! Well, I wish them both *joy* when he is landed in the frying-pan."

The easy manner in which his cousin's great establishment was maintained was marvellous to Mallender. Three or four, or half a dozen extra guests appeared to make no difference in the perfect domestic arrangements; everything went on wheels, everyone was looked after, everyone was free to do precisely what they pleased. Undoubtedly the head of the household was a

born organiser and manager; a woman of amazing tact, kindness, and self-control.

Geoffrey was still "an outsider" under canvas, and much preferred his tent to a bedroom indoors. He enjoyed the complete novelty, the fresh feel of the morning air as it crept into the tent; he liked as he lay on his camp cot to watch the dull yellowed grass, tinted pink by the rising sun, and to hear the birds beginning to stir in the bushes. Other guests had departed and arrived, and these latter included a civilian and his sister from Mysore, a cultured American traveller, and a sprightly married couple, Captain and Mrs. Harcourt Wylie, acquaintances of Sir William, who knew them at home, and having casually encountered them on an Indian platform, offered them a warm invitation to Hooper's Gardens. This they accepted with effusive thanks—their plans being at the time a little vague and undecided.

"My cousins," announced Sir William, in his broad-chested pompous style, "are the most hospitable people in a hospitable country; they keep open house, have a first-class cook, entertain enormously, and do you royally!"

The Wylies, clever, business-like partners, still in the early thirties, were capable of making themselves welcome and at home in most places; they danced admirably, and indefatigably, played bridge extraordinarily well, and talked and dressed in the latest fashion.

Captain Wylie—who never alluded to his regiment—was a tall thin man, with a hearty manner, and a cordial voice,—always admirably groomed, and enviably self-possessed.

His wife was slim, smart and very erect; her features were small and regular, her eyes small and intent. She wore pearls and diamonds—that were magnificent imitations—and a fixed, agreeable smile.

Beyond the fact, that Sir William had met them at Monte Carlo, and that they had come out in someone's suite, no one knew much about them; but they were

always lively and enthusiastic, ready to do anything, or go anywhere at a moment's notice. The Wylies referred to well-known people as their friends, and by their Christian names, and had evidently stayed about, and enjoyed themselves vastly; but whether they had a home of their own, or any belongings, was never positively disclosed. Nancy Brander did not like "the Prince and Princess Charming"—she thought the lady sharp and pushing, the man a well-mannered inquisitive snob—but as Nancy was in the minority, she wisely held her peace. A grand ball at the Banqueting Hall, given by His Excellency the Governor, was the first that Mallender attended. Everything was admirably done; the great room was crowded with everyone who was on "Government House List." He danced with Mrs. Villars, and sat out with her; noting with secret pride how much she was sought after, and how she was followed by the admiring eyes of men and women. She looked lovely in a Princess gown of gold satin, with a gold butterfly spreading its wings across her Empire bodice—butterflies caught up the graceful gold net draperies of her narrow skirt, and a golden band crowned her classic head. Yet the beauty of the night had honoured him with two waltzes and a supper dance! The beauty of the night danced divinely, as did Mallender; numerous wallflowers, and others, found it a real pleasure to contemplate them. Besides Mrs. Villars, Mallender waltzed with Mrs. Wylie,—whose style was perfection itself,—with Nancy and Fan, and several charming girls, among the latter Miss Miller.

She was pretty and girlish, and coloured up when he accosted her, and asked for a dance; subsequently when resting between two turns, they attempted the usual spasmodic conversation, he noticed for the first time how *very* blue her eyes were!

In answer to his question, Miss Miller informed him that the only other part of India she knew was Cannanore on the west coast.

"Not many balls there, I take it?" he said.

"No, there were few ladies, the place is like a sponge, so terribly damp and wet. We had one or two small dances,—but on a chunam floor, and a drugget."

"And the going pretty bad! I think I saw you riding in the paper-chase the other day."

"Yes, on an old Artillery 'caster,' with a mouth like iron. I am looking forward to the next gymkana, for Colonel Tallboys has offered me Naughty Mary."

"Has he, indeed!" exclaimed her partner, "she's a bit of a handful, you know."

"Yes, but I like her, and I am accustomed to what you call 'handsful.'"

"What, at Cannanore?"

"No; there we had bullocks; but I rode a great deal before I came out. I spent all my holidays, since I was about two years old, on a farm with my father's old nurse. Her family bred, and broke, hunters, they had quite a reputation."

"And so you learnt to ride, before you cut your second teeth?"

"Yes, I think so," and as she smiled she displayed two dazzling rows of these.

"And what else did you learn?"

"To milk and make butter, and rear fowl, and all sorts of unusual accomplishments."

"What sort, for instance?"

"Well, to drive a mowing machine," and she laughed gaily. "Shall we take another turn, before the music stops?"

As they launched into the vortex, Mallender felt sincerely sorry to think that this remarkably pretty bright girl, with all her inborn country tastes, was about to be delivered over to Colonel Harris, her father's contemporary!

"Won't you have some refreshment?" he suggested as they moved towards the buffet, "iced coffee, lemonade, champagne?"

"Lemonade, please. I never take wine. Once I

drank a large glass of champagne, thinking it was ginger-beer; and afterwards——"

"Yes, I know; the floor came up, and hit you in the face!"

"Not quite so bad, but I felt rather dizzy, and very, *very* miserable."

"Champagne is generally supposed to have the opposite effect, and to make you very, very happy! Will you give me another dance?"

As Miss Miller studied her programme, her mother appeared, decorated with the waving green feather, and leaning on the arm of Colonel Harris. They were both looking alarmingly glum, and the latter said:

"Barbie, this is our dance. Where *have* you hidden yourself? I've been searching for you all over the place, I've got a *vis-à-vis*, so come along," and with a scowl at Mallender, he carried her off. Her mother however still lingered, and before he was aware, had "puckaroed" (i.e. captured) her daughter's late partner.

"Oh, Captain Mallender," she simpered, bowing, and coquettishly waving the green feather, "you are related to my *dearest* friends—the Tallboys. I've known Colonel Tallboys for twenty years, and more, and I feel that I know you. I remember Freddy, a smart handsome young man *too*," she paused expressively, "and such a flirt! Will you be a dear good Samaritan and get me a glass of champagne?—I feel ready to faint!"

Startled by the threat, Mallender hastened to supply the lady's wants, but as the buffet was crowded, he had, what seemed to him, a long time to wait, and meanwhile she chattered continually; airing the now somewhat faded graces, that had once made her the belle of an up-country station. As Mallender listened to her remarks upon the other guests—chiefly critical and destructive—looked into her face, observed her close-set, reddish-brown eyes, and straight thin-lipped mouth, he felt moved with a sense of profound com-

passion for her daughter. When at last they re-entered the ball-room after this tedious and wearisome delay, a waltz was being played, and the sprightly matron said:

"I know you are not dancing this, Captain Mallender, so *do* take a little turn with me?" and before her victim had time to remonstrate, or to realise the situation, he was swimming round the room with the future mother-in-law of Colonel Harris.

Mrs. Miller danced,—as do many Anglo-Indian ladies,—remarkably well. She was slight and supple, and had the advantage of a score of years of incessant practice. The face now resting on her partner's shoulder, wore an indescribable expression of ecstatic triumph, for here was she, a woman with a grown-up daughter (and having to take what she could get, among the rubbish-heap of partners), waltzing "Mon Rêve" with one of the smartest, and most popular young men in Madras! However, her ecstasy proved short-lived; when the music had wailed out the last bars, she gasped:

"Oh, that was a treat. Now do find us a cosy corner!"

But instead of complying with this alluring request, her cavalier conducted the lady to a prominent chair, and with a formal bow, withdrew, sternly determined that he would not—as she had broadly hinted—be her companion in a "Kàla Jaga" and at supper.

The next grand ball took place within the ancient walls of Fort St. George; and Mallender, who was now on his guard, hastened to fill his programme at the earliest opportunity. He secured dances with Nancy, Mrs. Villars, Mrs. Wylie, and various pretty girls, but gave Mrs. Miller a cautiously wide berth, steadily ignoring her smiles, signals, and even wafted kisses!

However, she danced all night, as if for very life; but he noticed that little Miss Barbie—looking rather white and woebegone—sat out the greater part of the evening with her burly Colonel.

CHAPTER IX

After two postponements, the polo tournament at last came off, and provided the community with an exciting entertainment. Colonel and Mrs. Tallboys never missed a single match ; he being umpire, and a much respected authority on the polo ground, here this former brilliant performer was in his element. The little man knew most of the players well, and was acquainted with the personal character, merits or delinquencies, of every competing pony. The final, between the Chaffinches and the Marauders, brought all Madras to the Island, on a certain Thursday afternoon. Both teams were in magnificent form, and after a severely contested match, the Chaffinches won by six goals to five, amidst shouts and yells of applause.

Subsequently, Captain Byng received the cup at the gracious hands of Her Excellency, and when Mallender joined the party from Hooper's Gardens, he was accorded an ample share of praise ; for his hard straight hitting, and fine driving power, had more than once saved the game. Colonel Tallboys rode about from group to group on his smart pony, a proud and happy man, and Mrs. Villars, looking lovely in a great feathered hat, gazed at the hero with her inspiring eyes, and whispered " *Shabash !* "

The syren had undoubtedly caught Geoffrey in her toils ; he was acutely sensible of the glamour of her personality. With Lena Villars, appearances were not altogether deceitful, nor beauty vain. She had a soft low voice, a sympathetic, profoundly interested manner. Lena was not clever—and candidly admitted the fact—but professed that nothing gave her so much pleasure as to be with and listen to clever people—subtly insinuating that such were her companions.

The charming widow was gentle, and timid—except at bridge, where her courage was more or less foolhardy —and always lovely to behold. Her white gowns, and tussore suits, appeared different to those of other women ; so fresh, so creaseless, so eminently becoming. Her hats, and Panamas, exactly suited her. Of an evening in the verandah, with a chiffon scarf twisted about her head, it seemed to Mallender that he was contemplating a Madonna—or an angel. The fascinated young man was ready to do whatever the lady willed, and was almost as one who is hypnotised, or drugged—and yet, he was not in love with her ; merely her servant, her anxious attendant, one of her many slaves.

The season began to wane, and the guests at Hooper's Gardens to dwindle in numbers. Mrs. Villars, Nancy, Sir William, the Wylies, and Geoffrey, were all that remained. People were now preparing to ship themselves to England, or to make engagements, and arrangements for the Hills.

"You come with us, of course, Geoffrey," said his cousin as they sat in the smoking-room after tiffin. "You will get hunting, I'm taking up the horses, and my friends the planters will give you capital shooting in the *sholahs*. I hope, by this time, you have forgotten your crazy nonsense—eh ?"

"No, frankly, I have not," rejoined Mallender with unexpected decision. "I am still holding on to it. I should like to go to Ootacamund with you and Fan ; you have been most awfully kind, and made me feel absolutely at home—but I want to drive a bargain."

"Oh, bargain away !" rejoined his relative, but his tone was apprehensive, his air ungracious.

"If I hear of some news I am expecting, I'll have to leave you, probably at an hour's notice, for I've promised to hold myself in readiness ; and so if I go off rather abruptly, you will excuse me, won't you ?"

Colonel Tallboys, who was walking about the room, made no reply, but pulled down his waistcoat, with an angry jerk.

"After all, you will remember that I came out here with a certain object," urged the young man.

"Oh, yes, I'm aware of that, and if the object were known, you'd find yourself an object of derision." Having delivered himself of this opinion he sat down, and regarded his cousin with a fixed glare.

"I can't help it, I must stick to my job," rejoined Mallender doggedly. "I may not be summoned; but if I am, and should be detained, letters to the Bank of Madras will find me; of course I shall write. I know you dislike this subject, so we will make it clear now, and once for all!"

"'Pon my soul, I think you are mad!" burst out Colonel Tallboys. "This mania of yours is—serious. Here are Fan and I, both attached to you, and looking on you more as—a—a—a son than anything, and you want to bolt off after some will-o'-the-wisp. As for a clue, swindlers may, and will fool you, but mark my words, you'll never get hold of one!"

"But I *have* got hold of a slight one."

"Let's hear it!" he said sharply.

"I had a line from Brown and Co. to say, that my allowance ceased, from the day I came to Madras."

Colonel Tallboys almost leapt out of his chair, his face was crimson.

"You call that a clue!" he shouted, "why, man alive, *I* call it ruin!"

"No, not altogether," replied his companion in a steady voice, "I have a good balance in hand, and before that is exhausted, I hope to have solved the problem."

"'Pon my soul, I have no patience with you, Geoffrey," declared his cousin fiercely; then standing over him, like a little bristling terrier, he added, "Your father was undoubtedly eccentric of late years, no doubt of that—and on one subject, I honestly believe you are *not* sane!"

"Well, well, Fred, let us leave it at that," replied Mallender with an uneasy laugh, "don't let us talk about it any more."

"I may not talk, but I shall *think*," retorted Colonel Tallboys in a loud, tremulous voice, and with this parting speech he hurried from the room, overturning as he went an indignant dog, and a couple of golf-sticks.

During all these weeks, though temporarily carried away by continuous amusements, and the irresistible fascinations of Mrs. Villars, Mallender had figuratively clung to, and corresponded with Jaffer and Co.—in spite of the fact, that their answers were indefinite, and letters few and far between. As he sat in the smoking-room, the afternoon after this scene with his relative, a butler entered, salaamed, and said:

"Someone come on business to see your Honour."

"All right," he answered, "show him in."

Almost treading on the servant's heels, there entered a thin, flat-chested native, heavily pock-marked, with a cast in one of his eyes—*not* an attractive personality. He wore a long tight black velvet coat, patent leather boots displaying a surprising eruption of mother-of-pearl buttons, an embroidered skull cap, and gold spectacles. With a profound salutation, he presented a visiting-card, on which was neatly inscribed:

"From A. D. Shumilal and Co., Agents, 805 Pophams Broadway."

"Captain Mallender, I think?" he enquired.

"Yes, that's right."

"I have come as representative of this firm—who are acting for Jaffer and Co., Hyderabad."

"I hope you bring me some news at last?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then glibly replied:

"Well, sir, you understand, that this is a very ticklish business and difficult. So much time has passed. So much bridge under water as you—say——"

"Yes, yes, yes. I know all that," returned Mallender impatiently.

"But we have now good hopes, that the case will end in success."

"Then you *have* some information?"

"That is so; but the affair is most awfully expensive,

and I am sent here to request one small advance for outlay, only fifty pounds."

"But you have already had a hundred!"

"That is correct, and placed to credit," returned the clerk imperturbably, now producing a book from a pocket in his Noah's Ark coat, "and when you settle, I will hand you receipt."

"Yes, I dare say you will! You are rather premature, my friend. So far, I've seen *no* results for my money."

"Very soon, you shall. You understand, that we have to pay our staff through the nose. You will be ready, when summoned, to start at once."

"Why, of course; that's what I'm here for," rejoined Mallender impatiently.

"You may go far, you may go near. The man we are following fluctuates; sometimes he is close at hand, and sometimes out of reach for years!"

"By Jove, this sounds promising!"

"He is now in the country, and we may corner him any day; but he is very slip about and clever."

"You are sure that he is the right person?"

"Oh, yes, why not?" rejoined the clerk with easy confidence; and then, deliberately ticking off each finger, he continued, "Army man, retired; age between fifty and sixty,—always hiding identity, coming and going, many, many years. No letters from England, no English friends, no real home."

"Yes, it seems all right," said Mallender turning to open his dispatch-box, and extract a cheque-book. "Here," having scribbled for a moment, "is the money. As soon as you have any 'pucka' news, let me know at once."

The clerk received the slip of green paper, and having examined it carefully, laid down a receipt, and was about to depart when Mrs. Brander appeared, just back from golf.

"Ah, I'm interrupting a business interview!" she exclaimed, backing to the door.

"No, we have quite finished," replied Mallender,

nodding to the baboo, who immediately salaamed, and glided forth.

"I am certain that man has something to do with your mystery," announced the lady, now coming forward, and seating herself squarely in an arm-chair.

"What do you mean ?—what mystery ?"

"Oh, you need not pretend ! As a child, I was notorious for ferreting out secrets ; and I've always known that *you* had one."

"But what makes you think so ?"

"Uncle Fred told me you had come to India, about a gold mine ; you assured me, that you had no interest whatever in an ounce of India ! It is a pity you did not *agree* in your story ! Do tell the true tale to me ; I really think I ought to share it too ! I extracted from Fanny the fact, that there was something ; but beyond that, I could not pierce—no, not if I took a tin-opener ! Perhaps *I* could help you ? At least I'd be straight and honest, if not so sharp as your friend with the cock-eye, and the wreath of forget-me-nots round his cap."

"All right, then I'll tell you what there is to know," said Mallender impulsively, "but first, let me put away your sticks and golf-balls."

"Thank you ; I've just done the nine-hole course, and beaten Fanny to smithereens. Uncle Fred says I now walk with the golf stride !—isn't he rude ? Let us go into the verandah, where we cannot be overheard," and as she spoke, Mrs. Brander led the way out of the room, through the long French window.

When they were seated side by side in two luxurious cane chairs, Mallender imparted the outline of his enterprise without, remarkable to relate, one interruption.

"Now what do you think of it ?" he enquired, as he concluded.

"Give me time to consider. My head is reeling," declared Nancy, then looking at him with her clever grey eyes, she went on : "Tom has been about in this country ; he was born here, and both his father and grandfather were in the Indian Civil ; he has heard of,

and seen strange things, so *I* am not rudely incredulous. I believe that your Uncle is still in the land—but why? A jig-saw puzzle is nothing to this! I also believe that he will never allow you to find him. He has thirty years' start, and knows every hole, and corner, in the Presidency."

"But I don't believe that this man *is* my Uncle," argued Mallender with hasty emphasis, "so there is where we differ! He pretends he is, to Brown and Brown, and is a clever and unscrupulous forger; but I shall find his lair yet, and run the ruffian to earth, like any other vermin."

"It's an enormous task," said Nancy; "especially for you, an utter stranger, who cannot speak the language, and do not know our little ways. What does your Baboo propose to do in exchange for the cheque?"

"Put me on to my man," was the prompt answer; "he has a clue."

"Ah, yes, so he says," she replied, with a glance of derision, "that sort of creature would promise you the moon."

"Oh, he has not much to do with the business, merely a messenger, from the agents of Jaffer and Co. As soon as they give me the office, I'm off."

"Are you?" she exclaimed rather blankly, "and what about Fan, and Uncle Fred?"

"He knows my object in coming out. I told him at once—in fact, within the first five minutes."

"*And?*" now leaning forward, her chin on her hands.

"And—he won't help me. He is dead against me in this; in fact, he can't bear it spoken of; we had a bit of a breeze to-day, and the subject is barred!"

"Uncle Fred has a commonplace imagination, tied up in red tape, and fastened with a sealed pattern knot, but a very long head on his square little shoulders. I pin my faith to *his* opinion. Still, I feel conscious of the magnetism that belongs to a man of *purpose*, and I must confess, that your romantic enterprise appeals to me; I will do all I can to help you to find one, or the

other. I'll be your mouse; your Uncle—or the impostor—the lion!"

"Thank you awfully, my kind mouse."

"The woman who could assist you substantially, is Mrs. Fiske; unfortunately, she is not a mouse but a cat!"

"I can't bear the sight of her!"

"Yes, I know, because she is so maddening at bridge; and always adds up wrong, and argues; but she knows the Presidency, and every seamy tale for the last thirty years is at her finger-ends. Talk, including evil speaking, lying, and slandering—is her strong point. If you want to dig up an old divorce case, a racing scandal, a bankruptcy, go to Mrs. Fiske."

"I'm blessed if I do! Why do people stand her, and her tongue?"

"Because we are all afraid of her, shameful, miserable cowards! Of course, she ought to have been prosecuted for libel over and over again—but no one dares. On the contrary, we are all obsequiously civil and tremble before her, never knowing whose turn it may be next. And the awful part of it is, that her lies have always *some* foundation! For instance, if she were to see us sitting here together, talking secrets——"

"Well, what then?" demanded her companion brusquely.

"She might send an anonymous wire to Tom. How he would laugh! Ha! ha! ha!"

"I'm not going to laugh," declared Mallender with a flash in his eye, "that sort of woman, is like an infectious disease. She ought to be stuffed in a sack, and flung off the pier."

"Do please restrain your feelings," and Nancy lifted an appealing hand, "and I will say something *wise*. As your friend and confidante, I may assure you, that here in Madras, you will never get near your object—no, nor in Ooty. For you, it's nothing but play, play, play. *I* can see through Uncle's little plan; it is to keep you captive in Capua, ensnared by polo, golf—and other fascinations."

There was so much insinuation in the last three words, that Mallender coloured to his ears.

"You will find no opportunity to prosecute your search; so like Bacon's wise man, when you can't find opportunity—you must make it!"

"You are right," he answered with conviction, "I've agreed to this trip to Ooty, but when I've seen the place, I shall take a pull, and start on my own."

"Incognito, of course," she added impressively, "not as a young swell, with guns and servants, searching for a lost relation. *That* would bring you scores of bogus uncles; a keen stealthy tracking in an humble fashion, travelling intermediate class, and pretending to work for your daily bread, is your best line."

"Yes," he agreed, "as soon as I see a glimmer I'll start in rags, if necessary."

Nancy Brander critically considered her companion, from his glossy dark hair, to his neat brown boots, and softly repeated the words:

"*Rags!* You don't even know what they are! It's lucky you're searching for a man! to find a woman out here, would be absolutely hopeless."

"Oh—a woman—I dare say!"

"I see," she nodded her head, "in *her* case, you would not bother! You are not really a ladies' man!"

"Depends on the lady," he answered with a laugh.

"Well, Cousin Geoffrey, whatever you do, don't go and marry your grandmother!" was her somewhat enigmatic advice. "I shall write to Tom to-night, and tell him to dredge his memory, and try if he can recall any eccentric Englishmen, who live out here, and lie low; not loafers, but others who have a little money, and their own very particular reasons for not returning home; or who simply worship the East, for being the East, and cannot tear themselves away from the sun. Remember," she continued impressively, "that you must have some excuse for your rambling. Suppose you give out that you are writing a good popular book

on the common, or garden, insects of India—including white ants, and other *pouchees*, how would that be ? "

" Do I look like a man who could write a book ? " cried Mallender, jumping to his feet, and standing before her.

" No, I cannot say you do ; you look more like somebody musical. How would you like to go round with a gramophone, on a little cart ? "

" Since you gave me an option, I say, not at *all !* "

" I have it ! " clapping her hands, " photography,—that will take you anywhere and everywhere—short of a zenana."

" By Jove, a splendid idea ! and I can photograph a bit. I'll buy a camera to-morrow, and if this clue pans out all right, I'll take to the road, as a travelling photographer."

" Beware, that the road does not take *you*," she answered gravely. " We shall soon have the hot weather upon us, and you little know, what that means—yet ! You will keep Anthony, of course ? "

" Yes, and I suppose I'll have to give him a peep behind the scenes, eh ? "

" Quite unnecessary ! He knows all your secrets, perhaps not every detail, but I'm sure he suspects that you have some mysterious business out here. No doubt your affairs are exhaustively discussed in the cook-house, and the bazaar. Natives are so vitally interested in us, and our concerns. We are always on the stage—*they* are the audience. I dare say Anthony has met, and exchanged confidences with your baboo—or baboon ! Anthony has an inquisitive eye, but you can trust him. I advise you to tell him your plans, put him on his honour, swear him to secrecy—with a promise of rupees. He will enjoy the enterprise enormously ! since secrecy and intrigue are naturally in his bones, in fact, he ought to accept *half* wages. Anyway, I believe you will find him quite a useful Sherlock Holmes. Ah, here they all come, back from the golf links. Mrs. Villars and Sir William leading the van, the Wylies

with Fan—so I will leave you to listen to the tale of their triumphs, their scores, their drives, and how someone 'foozled,' and someone swore! Good-bye!" and with a gay nod, Nancy Brander carried her slim well-tailored figure, and smiling face, out of the verandah.

That same evening as he was dressing for dinner, Mallender took Anthony into his confidence.

"I understand that you are trustworthy," he began abruptly, "and so I am going to tell you something that you are to keep strictly to yourself."

"Oh, yes, saar, certainly, saar," he answered with unexpected fervour, "Master going to be married."

"No—you fool! See if the door is shut."

(Mallender had now been promoted to the house). Then in a few short sentences he disclosed his plans. As the particulars were gradually unfolded, Anthony's attitude and expression changed; his eyes dilated, as for his mouth, it was wide open, and from its action, appeared to be swallowing whole sentences, with unctuous avidity.

"So now you know," concluded Mallender, as tie in hand, he turned to the glass.

"Saar, saar," stuttered a choking voice, "I hearing all this tale, when I was small *chokra*—true I telling. My Uncle Fernandez, now very old, no teeth, no belly, was thirty years ago head waiter in Cavalry Mess, Bangalore, and that business making much talk, when two officers come back from shoot, all 'Tulla Bulla,' and the other Captain nowhere! Regiment all upside down, great bobbery making, and plenty sorry, because there was *nothing*—no funeral—*no* corpse body!"

"That missing officer was my Uncle," announced his master, "and I've come to India to find out what became of him; and by and by I shall start as a man who travels round, looking for employment."

"I beg your pardon, saar! Employment, a situation, *you*, saar!" Anthony gasped out these words, and then stood breathless. From the style of Mallender's belongings, clothes, and kit, he had formed a high

estimate of his status in life. Here was no poor Captain, with a mere two hundred and sixteen rupees four annas a month, but a master who wóre the best silk underclothing, and socks, had dozens of shirts, a silver mounted suit-case, and gave presents to ladies that cost hundreds of rupees; in fact, he had been making up his mind to ask for a rise of wages, and this projected playing at poverty descended like a thunderbolt.

"I shall travel about as a photographer," resumed Mallender, as he pulled on his coat, "and take groups and families, in out-of-the-way places, and you shall accompany me as my assistant and carry the camera."

This was not an alluring prospect. Anthony was naturally gregarious, he liked the society of smart fellow-servants, he enjoyed bragging, and cock-fighting, listening to piquant news, playing cards, and smoking good cigars. Nevertheless, the prospect of a man-hunt was exciting; yes, he would gladly take part in *that*.

"You can get me some cheap bazaar suits in kharki and drill," continued his master, "like what clerks wear; and a big common pith hat, and lots of soap and insect powder, and some towels. All my Europe kit, portmanteau, and guns, I'll leave behind me."

"I beg your pardon, saar, that bad sense. Better take one gun, plenty *budmash* up-country."

"Oh, a revolver will do. We must travel light."

"And how soon going, saar?"

"As soon as I hear some news I am expecting."

"Saar, beg your Honour's pardon, but I know one very clever man in Gora Bazaar. He is wise as a snake, has his ear to the ground, and finds lost things. Why not find lost gentlemans? Also, I knowing by your Honour's favour, one *very* good magic *wallah*."

"No, no, no," said Mallender impatiently, "none of that rot, Anthony! You get things ready for a start, here are fifty rupees, and bring a *dirzee* to-morrow, to make me some clothes for roughing it up-country."

At the same hour the next evening, Anthony as usual awaited his master, and with him was a companion.

"Who's this?" enquired Mallender, "the *dirzee?*"

"No, saar, my assistant, saar. If we go up-country, plenty work for *two*. I can cook and shoot game; this boy will do boots, wash dishes, and carry camera. He is a heathen, and very cheap, only six rupees. His name is Chinna-Sawmy, which by your favour means 'Little God.'"

"I hope he won't turn out a little devil!" responded Mallender. "Here, let me have a look at him."

Chinna-Sawmy, who now stood forward, showing two rows of beautiful teeth, was very dark, with inky black eyes, and black shades in his cheerful countenance. His age might be ten, or it might be fifteen. He wore a white coat, which almost swept the ground, an enormous turban—both obviously borrowed—and two silver toe-rings.

"Well, Anthony, remember that you are responsible for him. Does he speak English?"

"Oh, yes, saar," promptly responded Chinna-Sawmy, "I speak very well English, and I have a good chit—I dog boy to General Pringle, and five dogs; and Mrs. General, she liking me too much."

Here Anthony broke in. "Chinna-Sawmy is lucky, always finding things, once find gold watch, and that for why I catching Chinna-Sawmy; better than magic *wallah*," and he seized upon and exhibited the boy's hands, on each of which were two thumbs—small, perfectly formed, and growing from the same joint. "This bringing master plenty luck!" announced Anthony with an air of overwhelming conviction. But his master recoiled a step, and said:

"Oh, yes, all right; but I won't have the fellow to wait on *me*. I dare say, out here, a double growth may be a fine thing, but I draw the line at two thumbs on one plate," and having made this declaration, Captain Mallender went to dinner, and Chinna-Sawmy gave expression to his joy by standing on his head.

CHAPTER X

The most popular Meet was at the Marmelong Bridge, and here on a certain Thursday morning half Madras society was assembled on horseback, wheels, or, the lazy folks, in motors, awaiting the arrival of the hounds.

Colonel Tallboys, admirably turned-out and mounted to correspond, was engaged in an animated conversation with little Miss Miller—admittedly the best of horsewomen, and keenest of followers. Unfortunately her steeds were rarely worthy of their rider; to-day, for instance, she was reduced to a bony old waler, who looked as if he had been knocking about the world for many years, and had lately fallen into low estate. As Mallender joined the party the girl was saying:

"Yes, this *is* the Nizam. I knew he had been raced; and so you remember him winning the Gold Cup ten years ago! What a change! I always feel so sorry for animals when they grow old; Father bought him at auction at the Stable Company for a mere song, and rides him as a charger; after father, *I* must seem a mere feather! The Nizam loves jumping, and galloping, and finds it much more to his taste than dull morning parades."

"For all his age he has a wild and eager eye," observed Mallender, "if you will allow me I will take up his curb, it's pretty loose."

"No, no, thanks very much," said Barbie, "if we have any jumping, I must give him his head."

"It's a pity you can't give him a new pair of fore-legs," remarked Colonel Tallboys, "he is not a safe mount now, poor old boy. You should have had Naughty Mary to-day, only the farrier pricked her in shoeing, and she's a bit lame. I'll send her over to you every morning."

"Thank you a million times! I do love her, naughty as she is, but chestnuts always have hot tempers."

"They say the same of red-haired people, and it's not true," declared Colonel Tallboys—whose own youthful locks had been distinctly carroty—"Ah, here come the hounds, and now we are off. I expect he will draw towards the Mount," and as he spoke the little man wheeled about, to jog beside the Master.

A Jack was speedily on foot; a fine, stout-hearted fellow, who immediately headed for his home in Palaveram Hills, seven miles away. It was a fast thing, and after a time, between the heat, the pace, and the rough going, a number of the hunt tailed away. Miss Miller and the Nizam were, however, still well to the fore; she had an eye for country, and made for a certain stiff mud wall, which cut off a considerable amount of paddy fields. Here Mallender was her sole companion, and as they galloped side by side, he noticed her face, girlishly alight, her colour brilliant with excitement.

"I'll give you a lead," he shouted, and putting on the pace raced up to the obstacle, cleared it in beautiful style, and had galloped about twenty lengths, when it occurred to him to look back; then he pulled up sharply, and turned his horse.

The Nizam was struggling on the ground, Miss Miller was lying near him in a heap. She sat up, then scrambled to her feet as Mallender approached; she looked white, and dazed, as she tottered over to a tree, and leant heavily against it.

"I'm afraid you are hurt?" he asked as he dismounted.

"No, only a little stupid,"—she gazed at him vaguely, as if she had never seen him before, and he noticed that her temple was bruised.

Meanwhile the Nizam had found his legs, and instead of waiting on the good pleasure of his rider, shook himself violently, and wheeling about, tore away in pursuit of the vanishing hunt. As the young lady seemed about to faint, Mallender hastily produced and proffered his flask, which, however, she dismissed with an impatient hand.

" Where am I ? and who are you ? " she asked in a tone of bewilderment.

" I'm Mallender, Miss Miller—don't you know me ? "

" No, where am I, tell me ? "

" You've been hunting—and you've just had a pip off the old horse," he explained, with patient slowness.

" Where ? "

" At the wall ; where you took it was a foot too high for the Nizam, and he landed on his head."

" I remember—now."

" I think you are only a bit shaken—he might have broken your neck."

" How I *wish* he had ! " was her disconcerting rejoinder.

" Come, come, Miss Miller, I see you are knocked out of time," said Mallender cheerfully, " I know what it's like myself."

" No, no, you don't know," she contradicted hysterically, " you—you don't understand—how *could* you ? " Something in her voice moved him unspeakably.

As Mallender looked at his companion, the expression of her quivering white face was pitiful beyond words. And he *did* know, he did understand. The momentary shock had evidently brought the girl's real feelings to the surface ; he had caught a glimpse of the inmost heart, and secret misery, of little fair-haired, hard-riding, Barbie. Undoubtedly he had no right to this involuntary confidence. He, a mere passer-by, who had chanced on a glimpse of an impending tragedy. Could he not avert it ? Barbie, so pale, pretty, and helpless, would be driven by the whip of tongues, by the cruelty of moral force, to throw away her priceless youth, her whole future—and no one could save her but herself ! All these strange and disturbing thoughts flashed through the young man's mind, as he stood holding his impatient horse, and the girl leaned against a tree with strained gaze fixed upon the flat horizon. She seemed to be lost in a sort

of day-dream, and to have completely forgotten his very existence; it was almost as if he and she had a whole empty world to themselves.

The hunt had disappeared, there was not a soul to be seen, and scarcely a sound to be heard, save the faint creaking of a water-wheel, and the scream of a kite, from the hard blue sky above them. As Mallender contemplated his silent companion, wondering how long the situation would last? and what he was to do? she suddenly recovered herself.

"I feel better," said she in her natural voice, "I'm all right now, I see that rude old horse has deserted me, how *am* I to get home?"

"You shall ride Rocket," replied Mallender, "he will carry you all right—I'll walk beside you, and lead him."

"No, indeed," she protested, "you have lost the run of the season, I'm *so* sorry, but I think, if you rode towards the Mount, you might still see something of them, and if you come across it—send a *gharry* for me, —I'll get to the road somehow!"

"We will *both* get to the road somehow," he answered; "let me put you up."

"I've twisted my foot," she explained with a wry smile, "please don't touch it."

"Then in that case I must lift you," and he raised her bodily in his arms, and placed her on the saddle.

Leading the horse carefully along the narrow bunds dividing paddy fields, or over bare and rocky tracts, among bushes of castor-oil plants, across sandy, dry water-courses, the pair at last reached the road. Their progress towards the outskirts of the city and the lines of the native regiment commanded by Colonel Miller was necessarily slow, and more than an hour elapsed before the pair arrived at their destination. A surprising amount of talk can be accomplished in an hour, and the young people thus thrown so unexpectedly together found plenty to say to one another. Mallender spoke of his home, his regiment, and his

dogs, and Barbie realised that her "syce" (as he called himself) was a man who owned hunters and a "place." Yet he was as simple and unassuming and exhibited no more "side" than if he were a clerk like Reggie Scott, who had nothing beyond a miserable hundred and fifty rupees a month. That Reggie adored her Barbie was well aware; he was a nice boy, but she did not care for him—except as a partner at tennis. One day in a towering rage he had taunted her with having no more heart, or romance, than a cold potato! Was this true? she wondered; had she really no heart? Was she incapable of deep love for any living mortal?

Wearing a pair of brand-new riding-boots, leading a disappointed and unwilling horse over rough broken ground, through grey-green cactus and castor-oil plants—finally along dusty by-roads, would have seemed a hateful task to most men; but Mallender was unconscious of any disagreeables, he neither felt the sun beating on his back, the dust, or the distance; he was only sensible of the unexpected charm of his present companion.

As for Barbie, miles on a slippery saddle,—the uncomfortable attitude, and aching foot,—were agreeably discounted by a subtle sympathy which had arisen between her escort and herself.

As the same escort tramped through the soft red dust, he found himself unexpectedly confiding various matters to his charge. He gave *her* no evasive answers when she asked what had brought him to India; but frankly informed her that his visit was connected with a curious family business he was obliged to see through. "It has," he added, "to do with something that happened thirty years ago."

"It sounds romantic!"

"I suppose some would call it so," he answered, lamely.

"What does Colonel Freddy call it?"

"Madness!" was the curt reply.

"Madness!" echoed the girl, and she looked down at her companion with startled eyes.

"Yes," he replied doggedly. "If I were to tell you about it, you'd probably say the same! I confess that it sounds extraordinarily silly, yet I mean to stick to it."

"Then I wish you well through your task, and every success," she said gravely.

For a moment Mallender was conscious of an acute temptation to tell this little girl all about his quest—he assured himself that in *her* he would surely find a sympathetic confidante,—but on second thoughts he changed his mind, and merely said:

"It's a stiffer job than I expected, and out here it's so confoundedly hard to get things moving."

Confidences are contagious, and the two young people exchanged many ideas and opinions as they drew nearer, and yet nearer, to the suburbs of Madras. They did not touch on any deep or vital subjects, but agreed in their love of dogs, and of most animals; in a liking for country life,—raspberry and currant tart, Lehar's waltzes, and Rudyard Kipling. Barbie talked frankly, yet shyly, of the farm,—her school-fellows, and school-days, but on the subject of her career as a grown-up young lady she was dumb.

"You will be returning to England this spring, won't you?" asked her companion. The question was in the nature of a discreet feeler.

"My father's time is up," she replied, "and he and my mother go home in April—as for me——" she came to an abrupt stop.

"As for you?" he repeated, looking up at her shadowed blue eyes, and noticing the wistful misery of her face.

"Nothing is decided," she answered with a gulp; and a spasm, half of laughing, half sobbing, caught her breath.

Mallender was suddenly seized by an irresistible desire to speak. His mother's warm impulsive blood was beating in his veins. Why should he not urge upon this girl, that she had her own life to live; that she must not sacrifice her youth, and future, to the selfish demands of three elderly people, who had enjoyed *their* day?

As he struggled between a temptation to deliver his soul, and a conviction that he would be guilty of "beastly cheek," his thoughts were put to flight by Miss Miller, who exclaimed:

"Here we are in Vepery, close to our lines, and your dreadful dusty walk is nearly ended!"

In another moment, they had come within sight of a bungalow, and on its gate was a board, bearing the name, "Colonel Miller, 20th Carnatic Rifles."

"I assure you I've enjoyed what you call my 'dreadful dusty walk,' Miss Miller," said Mallender, "and as far as I'm concerned, I'm sorry it's over; but you must be dead beat, and glad to be home."

And what a squalid home! (An exception, not the rule among military households in India, which as a rule are remarkably neat and trim; even where rupees are scanty, there is taste and refinement; but the Millers had always been an indolent, improvident, and self-indulgent couple, who found their pleasures abroad, whose abode was makeshift, and their motto "A short life, and a merry one." Now, after thirty-two years' service, Colonel Miller was about to retire on his pension —leaving behind him few well-wishers, and many debts.)

The mud garden, which intervened between gate and bungalow, held some sickly crotons, bushes of the shoe plant, and a variety of ragged kitchen rubbers, also not a few energetic hens—who were dusting themselves with commendable energy. The verandah was lined with pots of withered geraniums, and irritable-looking cacti; a green parrot in a bazaar cage hung between two pillars, talking scandal to his own grey claw. Here also were exposed piles of battered packing cases, old bullock trunks, wine cases, saddlery, and sprawling in a long chair, in his sleeping suit, reclined Colonel Miller, who was smoking a "Trichy" with an air of sluggish satisfaction.

"Hullo!" he shouted to someone within, "Barbie has come to grief!"

The announcement brought Mrs. Miller from the dark

interior ;—Mrs. Miller, in a soiled pink dressing-gown, bare feet in slippers, and hair in curling-pins. She stopped short, as if shot,—here indeed was Barbie, riding a strange animal, and accompanied by a man—young Mallender, of all people. He had seen her! Well, she must just brave it out!

Several lurking slovenly servants who had also witnessed the arrival, came slinking round a corner of the bungalow, in order to stare at the smart gentleman, and his fine horse.

"What has happened?" screamed Mrs. Miller, seizing a *solar topee*, and thrusting it on her head.

"Miss Miller has had a fall," replied her escort, putting two fingers to his helmet, "but it is nothing serious."

"And where's the horse?" she screamed.

"Oh, he got away,—I expect he is all right!" was the soothing response.

"Please lift me down," murmured Barbie, "and don't *wait*."

"I thought you could ride anything, my girl," said her father, as she limped up to him.

"The old Nizam was blown, and came down at a wall."

"I hope he hasn't barked his knees, eh, Mallender? Very kind of you to bring my little girl home. You'll excuse this kit—it's a Europe morning, you know, and at this hour you must take us as you find us."

"Of course, sir, of course," assented the visitor, "it's barely nine o'clock."

"Have a peg, and a cheroot?"

"No,—thank you,—it's a bit early!"

"Ah, you young fellows are different to what *we* were! you're all for tea, and Pérrier water! Hullo, here comes Harris in his war-paint," as Colonel Harris, bestriding a fat charger, and attended by a syce, rode proudly into the compound. He saluted his friend, and contemporary, then stared aggressively at Mallender, who supported his gaze with imperturbable sang-froid.

"Barbie took a toss," explained her parent, "and Captain Mallender has just brought her home."

"Oh, has he, eh! Good morning, Mallender—any the worse, Barbie?" he enquired, descending heavily as he spoke.

"No, only my ankle, nothing much."

"Ah, I see we must put a stopper on to this hunting of yours," declared Colonel Harris as he climbed the steps murmuring condolences, and with clanking sword, waddled over to where his lady-love sat, in a lop-sided cane chair.

"I will say good morning," called out Mallender, now mounting his horse. The sight of Barbie, and the mawkish solicitude of her admirer, was altogether too much for his equanimity. Towards unconscious Colonel Harris there arose in his mind a sudden fierce dislike and enmity, and with a comprehensive farewell he trotted out of the gate. All eyes followed him, including those of Mrs. Miller—who was peeping through the *chick*. She had hastily retired to take out the curling-pins, and put on her stockings.

A smart, soldier-like figure in his neat riding kit, on his fine well-groomed New Zealander, a contrast, thought Barbie, to her elderly red-faced lover, who was still panting from the exertion of ascending the verandah.

At this juncture, the appearance of the Nizam created a diversion; the side-saddle was intact, also his knees; he was covered with sweat and foam, but appeared to be in buoyant spirits, as if he had thoroughly enjoyed himself!

Meanwhile Mrs. Miller followed her daughter into her bedroom—a low, bare apartment, overlooking the servants' go-downs, and sparsely furnished with a cot, a press, and a rickety dressing-table.

"Show me your foot?" she commanded. "Well, yes, it's swelled. You must bathe it, and send for arnica, it will be all right in a few days. Now listen to me, Barbie," she went on impressively, "you are not to bring young men here,—James doesn't *like* it."

"But I did not bring Captain Mallender, mother—he brought *me*."

"Nonsense, you ought to have got a *gharry*!"

" Not one to be had, in the paddy fields beyond Sydapet."

" Now, no impertinence! Understand, once for all, I won't have Mallender hanging about, so don't you go making up to him."

Barbie became scarlet, and flung her boot across the room with unnecessary violence.

" Keep your temper, Barbara! I won't allow you to speak to him, or encourage him."—In Mrs. Miller's bosom, there rankled a sharp and spiteful memory of the young man's indifference, and neglect.—" He fancies himself no end, and looks down on all Madras spins, and I hear from *good* authority he is a regular bad lot; so see that you give him a wide berth, or I'll know the reason why. As long as you are under my roof, you must obey my wishes. When you have a house of your own, you can please yourself. You'd better get the ayah to bandage your foot, and put on one of your father's slippers. You must be quick and change and come out to breakfast, as James is here."

CHAPTER XI

One afternoon, after a couple of hours' severe polo practice, Mallender returned home to bathe, and change; and subsequently feeling considerably refreshed, sauntered out to have a smoke. In the immediate neighbourhood of his tent was an ancient pleasure-ground, which doubtless had been laid out in the days of Jane Austen when ladies took exercise and " walked in the shrubbery." Behold a shrubbery with tropical trees, thick undergrowth, a wild tangle of shrubs and creepers, splashed with blossom; and blazing masses of oleanders, pomegranates and variegated crotons, intersected by overgrown, narrow walks. In an open space was a large half-empty, chunam tank, and one or two stone benches. Here Mallender sat down, and lit a cigar. He seldom now had a moment to himself, his days were a wild rush from one function to another. Undoubt-

edly he was having a very jolly visit, but he must take a pull. He had been nearly a month at Hooper's Gardens, and it was a case of "As you were." His correspondents Jaffer and Co. seemed to be of the same mind as the French cynic, who remarked that "when making promises to people, it was always wise to be exceedingly vague."

He had engagements for weeks ahead, and if nothing turned up meanwhile, had agreed to accompany his relatives to the Hills. He liked them both immensely, and Nancy too. There were lots of good fellows in the polo teams, and the Fort; he was really having the time of his life! All the same, he had not come out to take part in this giddy round. When he began to talk of his enterprise to his cousin, it was odd how sharply he changed the subject; but whatever happened, he could not allow Fred to stand in his way! These reflections were suddenly interrupted by an audible, half-strangled sob; Mallender looked about him. At first he had an idea that the sound came from the mysterious enclosure over the wall; possibly the Prince had been chastising one of his women-folk. It was rather a weird establishment; generally silent as death. At times, he caught the sound of squealing horses, men's sonorous authoritative voices, and occasionally, at a very late hour, the strains of a zitar were wafted above the intervening neem and pagoda trees. Another loud heart-shaking sob! It proceeded from this side of the boundary, and his own immediate vicinity; Mallender rose quickly, and turning into a narrow walk, half choked by masses of shrubs, discovered a girl sitting on a stone seat, her head bowed, her face buried in her hands—evidently in an agony of grief. Hearing his footsteps, she started and looked up, and he found himself face to face with Miss Sim. And, oh what a haggard, tear-stained, ghastly countenance!

"What is the matter?" he asked brusquely.

She choked, and made no reply, but merely continued to stare at him stupidly. He noticed, that beside her

on the seat lay a small suspicious looking bottle, at which following his glance, she made a frantic grab.

"Come, Miss Sim," he resumed, now sitting down beside her, "let me hear all about it,—is it something so *very* bad ?"

A dry shudder was her only answer.

"Can't you tell me ?" he urged, "I may be able to pull you through. Anyway, my cousin will. I hate to see you like this." She was still sobbing hysterically. "Don't look at me, but imagine I'm another woman —who just wants to do you a good turn."

Suddenly he remembered her story ; here was the so-called "sponge" in desperate trouble, and possibly at the end of her resources. Although they had been nearly a month in the same house, they had but scant acquaintance. Miss Sim did not ride, play bridge, or take any part in social activities ; if Mallender ever thought of her, it was as a colourless young woman, with anxious eyes, who seemed only too thankful to be ignored, and overlooked. He had noticed her motoring with Fanny, and helping her with notes, and menu cards. Fred, too, talked, played tennis, and danced with her, but to most of their other guests Miss Sim was as a ghost. Mrs. Villars recognised her existence so far as to make use of her and send her messages ; whilst Mrs. Wylie ridiculed her openly, and treated her as if she were a servant.

"In the first place, hand me over that little bottle," he went on authoritatively.

No answer beyond a subdued weeping and choking.

"If you don't, I shall have to take it from you."

Moved by this threat, she slowly unclosed her limp fingers, and he promptly possessed himself of a tiny blue phial, on which was scrawled :

"Poysun—fur dog."

"Now," said Mallender as he crossed his legs, and looked at her sternly, "I insist on your telling me what this means ?" He realised, that he must adopt a determined attitude, with this miserable weeping creature. "Come, now."

"Oh, it's a long, long story," she moaned, "and I've been such a fool!"

"We have all been that," he answered cheerily. "Unless I know what your trouble is, how on earth can I help you?"

"Must I really tell you?" and she looked up at him with streaming eyes.

"Why not? But first of all, let us get out of this jungle, and sit in the open by the tank," and he rose, and led the way followed by wretched Miss Sim, whose spasmodic sobs were still audible, though she was now comparatively calm.

"To begin with," she said as she dried her eyes, "I made a fatal mistake in coming out to India. I had no business in this country."

"Precisely my own case, according to Brown and Co.," reflected Mallender.

"But I was so miserable at home; an orphan, living with my aunt, as maid and governess to her four children. I had always longed to see India, and devoured every book relating to the East that I could lay hands on, and a girl I knew, had a married sister in Poona, and read me her delightful letters. Then when I went for a holiday to an old school-fellow, I met a lady who lived out here, and who took a fancy to me"—she paused for a moment, and added hysterically, "I wonder you don't laugh!"

"Why should I laugh?" he asked sharply.

"I was so different then, bright, and gay. I could sing, and tell fortunes, and trim hats, and Mrs. Powell, who was returning to India, said, that if ever I could scrape up the passage money, and make my way out, she would give me a ripping time."

"I see."

"I got this idea firmly fixed in my mind, and worked for it like a slave. I sold some old jewellery, and bought things, and got together my outfit, and at the end of six months, I advertised for, and obtained a passage to Bombay, as nurse to one child. Then I told

Aunt Todd; she was furious, and declared that if I went, what she called 'wild-goosing to India,' she would never have anything more to say to me as long as she lived."

"And you came all the same!" commented her companion.

"I did. I had a delightful passage, and made a number of new friends. Of an evening, I sang and acted, and played bridge. I never shirked my work; but once Jacky was in bed, and asleep, I considered myself *free*. Mrs. Blunt and I had a difference of opinion on the subject—she expected me to sit, mewed up in the cabin, till bedtime. But I did not care what she said. I was reckless, and happy, and greedy of amusement. When we arrived in Bombay I sent Mrs. Powell a wire, 'Here I am—may I come?' the answer was merely 'Yes,' and I confess, I felt a little damped; for in England, she had been so demonstrative, and affectionate. However, when I reached Chotapore, after a long dusty journey, she seemed rather pleased to see me; but somehow, I felt in my bones, that this Mrs. Powell was not the same woman I had known in Ealing. Still, she made me welcome to her spare room, and I trimmed up her hats, and things, and sang, and told fortunes at her little parties. I think Mr. Powell liked me; he took me out riding, and taught me piquet, but his wife soon grew tired of me,—and let me see it. I had supposed that in India, guests stayed for months and months, but I found that times were changed; a few weeks, or even days, is the limit of a visit."

"And what happened next?" enquired Mallender.

"After leaving the Powells, I went on to various ship acquaintances, and more or less enjoyed myself for six months. After that my money began to give out, and also my invitations, and wardrobe. By the end of the year, I was forced to write an abject letter to my aunt, imploring her to pay my passage home."

"And she refused, and said she'd see you further?" threw in Mallender.

"She said nothing; I 've sent four letters registered, and no reply,—though she *must* know that I am absolutely penniless, and destitute."

"But what has brought your troubles to a crisis?"

"Many things. For one, my only girl friend, and confidante, who advises and helps me, has sprained her ankle, and her odious mother will not allow us to meet, when I call I'm told 'Missus can't see.' Perhaps she's afraid I want to borrow money!"

"But why go so far? Why go outside this place? Surely you have friends here—my cousin?"

"That is just another reason. Mrs. Tallboys has done so much for me, her kindness is—oh, you have *no* idea of it! I came for one month, my second visit, and I'm here three. Mrs. Brander has given me things, and lent me money. If she were my sister, she could not have done more. No, sooner than continue to impose on these kind good people, I'll kill myself!" and as she spoke, she clenched her hands, the expression of her face was fixed and distraught, her pale eyes looked enormous.

"But who says you are sponging?" demanded Mallender.

"Oh, everyone—Mrs. Fiske,—Mrs. Wylie,—Mrs. Wylie makes remarks, that burn and sting. She laughs, and is so scornful, and superior, and talks of sponges from the servants' hall, and asks for the address of my tailor and dressmaker? She drives me nearly frantic,—though I say nothing. I have tried desperately hard to leave Hooper's Gardens; I've written to people, and implored them to take me as unpaid maid, or nurse—*no one* wants me, and I have no money. I gave my last two rupees to an old woman to buy me that stuff you have in your hand—I said it was for a dog—but of course she guesses—natives are always so sharp. Then I made up my mind to take it out here—as it will make less fuss afterwards—than if I—did it indoors; and long ago a girl *did* drown herself in this tank. So, you see," suddenly springing

to her feet, " there is nothing else for it. We must all go some time! and—I really am not wanted in the world. I feel ever so brave now. *Please* let me have my little phial again, it will be the truest kindness, and do you go away,—and—and come back in half an hour."

" You know, I shall do nothing of the sort," he rejoined angrily. " Do you think *I* am mad, too? Listen to me, Miss Sim: how much will it cost you to take you home?"

" Oh, ever so much; even a second-class, would be thirty pounds."

" Well now, look here, I can let you have a hundred. Honestly, I'm pretty well off, and you can pay me back any time—say in twenty years. How will that be?"

Miss Sim's lips were trembling, her eyes never left his face, as he was speaking. At last, she said:

" Oh, Captain Mallender,—how *could* I accept it?"

" At once, since you ask me, and the sooner you make a start the better. Let me see; the mail comes in on Tuesday—you can pretend your people have written, and asked you to return ' Ek Dum,' as they say out here."

" Well, at any rate I have not much to pack," she exclaimed hysterically, " and thirty pounds will be ample—why, it is the price of my life!"

" Don't talk melodramatic rot!" he rejoined impatiently. " You want a pull up, and I'm here, to lend a hand. You must have a hundred; you say you owe money, your passage will be at least fifty, you will require warm clothes, and cash in hand. You cannot manage on less."

" Once I am in England, I can earn my living; I am a qualified teacher. I will pay you back some day, Captain Mallender—as sure as I stand here," she faltered tremulously.

" Please don't let that worry you. I'll draw out the money, take your ticket, and bring you the balance, shall we say here? the day after to-morrow—early, or late?"

"I cannot come here early, the servants and syces are always about, but I could meet you after dinner, —before they begin bridge."

"All right then—Thursday—no, by Jove! I'm dining out. Shall we fix Friday, on this spot at half-past nine, sharp?"

Miss Sim was about to reply, when a man came suddenly round a turn of the walk, and stood momentarily transfixed. It was Captain Wylie—one of the dwellers in tents.

"Hullo, Mallender!" he began awkwardly, "they are looking for you indoors. Byng wants you. Well, Miss Sim, and so you did not go to the Croquet Tournament after all? How was that? Preferred the garden, eh?"

"Yes," she answered brusquely, and turning her back on him, instantly disappeared among the shrubs. Mallender however stood his ground, and said: "Oh, Byng, yes! By Jove, I forgot him! it's about the polo of course. I'll go in now——" and he walked away whistling "The Jewel of Asia," and thus the interloper was left in sole possession of the field. For some time, he stood with a half smile on his keen clean-shaven face, then he gave a loud harsh laugh, and strolled away.

Naturally the Friday rendezvous fell through. Mallender the conspirator was obliged to take bolder, and more open measures; he sent Miss Sim a note by Anthony, contrived to sit next to her at dinner, and discussed her arrangements; subsequently in the drawing-room he brought her a little packet, which he handed over stealthily—saying as he did so:

"This belongs to *you*."

The packet contained money, and a first-class ticket to London.

"I hope you will find it all right," he added, with significance.

"Of course I can never thank you," she murmured in a broken voice, "I believe this generous action will bring you good luck. I shall write to you through the

Bank, and though we are not likely to meet again—I will never, never, forget you."

The news of Miss Sim's impending departure caused considerable surprise; no one more surprised than Captain Mallender!

"What a liar and hypocrite I am," he said to himself, as he discussed the news with Nancy Brander, whose joy and amazement both were heartfelt, and sincere. Now, that Miss Sim appeared to have *friends*, Mrs. Villars and Mrs. Wylie vouchsafed an exaggerated display of interest in her proceedings, and overwhelmed her with messages and parcels to take to London; whilst Mrs. Tallboys busied herself in making arrangements for the girl's comfort, and in buying clothes, rugs, and woollies, for the voyage.

Nancy Brander received the return of her loan with undisguised astonishment,—and immediately invested half of it, in a substantial gift. These two kind women accompanied the poor waif and stray to the ship, with many instructions saw her comfortably settled, and left her in charge of the Captain.

No sooner was Miss Sim well away at sea, than a little cloud of scandal arose. Immediately after her departure, Captain Wylie had informed his wife of his awkward adventure in the shrubbery.

"Strolling about there, I came bang upon Mallender, and the Sim girl, in floods of tears; they were fixing up another meeting for Friday night! Don't say a word to anyone; Mallender carried it off wonderfully; not the least disconcerted—evidently an old hand at the game, and as cool as a cucumber!"

"I am astonished," she exclaimed, "I never thought he was that sort. What a young hypocrite, and Mrs. T. thinks him a saint! Fancy having an affair with an ugly abject creature like a third housemaid! I always supposed, he was gone on our lovely widow."

"Well, you see you were wrong! It's a case of still waters—I thought you'd be amused. Mind you keep what I've told you to yourself."

But to Mrs. Wylie this was impossible. She was choking to gossip, and though she did not reveal a name, she informed Mrs. Villars, and Mrs. Fiske, that the Sim girl had a secret, and *desperate* love affair, and was accustomed to meet her lover of an evening, when all the house-party were playing bridge,—from which they would remember, she had always excused herself. To this, was added yet another piece of news. It transpired, in answer to unkind enquiries, that Miss Sim had not received any letters by the English mail, and therefore the story of the money from home was simply an audacious invention.

CHAPTER XII

The hot weather had arrived, the punctual brain-fever bird made his unwelcome appearance, and a much-diminished company prepared to leave Hooper's Gardens, for the Blue Mountains. Colonel Tallboys, who had obtained sixty days' leave (with power to add to their number), his wife, her niece, and child, Mrs. Villars, her maid, and Geoffrey Mallender. Urgent private business connected with cotton, had summoned unwilling Sir William to Bombay, and the Wylies were reluctantly compelled to bring their long " week-end " to a close.

" Hooper's Hotel " was a hostelry entirely after their own hearts; a gracious easy hostess, an admirably run establishment, capital ponies to ride, gay entertainments, and lots of bridge. They were unaffectedly sorry to part with " the management," and Mrs. Wylie threw out many hints, as to how much she longed to visit the celebrated Neilgherries, and talked wistfully of " the chance of a lifetime ! " But for once, Fanny Tallboys did not " rise." Then her guest—a woman of invincible nerve, and resolution—came to her sitting-room one morning, and said, with her most persuasive smile :

" Dearest and kindest of friends ! I have a great,

great, an enormous favour to ask. Alas! our plans for Ceylon have fallen through. We *were* going to Newara Eliya to the Gordon Walkers, but I heard to-day, that she is ill, and too indisposed to receive us. So will you, like the angel you are, have us for a little, little, tiny visit in Ooty? Darling Cecil wants a change from this steaming, relaxing place—I've been quite anxious about him the last week, and you know our *abhorrence* of hotels, with their filthy rooms, and disgusting food."

Poor Mrs. Tallboys, feeling exceedingly guilty and uncomfortable, was obliged to tell the piteous pleading lady, that she was really too sorry, but that every corner in "Woodford" had its allotted tenant.

"Tents?" suggested the petitioner, with ruthless pertinacity. "I should simply adore a tent!"

Unfortunately tents were out of the question at that season in the Hills, and so this pair of clever "sponges" and adventurers were compelled to seek for other quarters, and took their departure, with perfunctory thanks, and an air of unpardonable injury; and it is a regrettable fact, that they subsequently spoke of their hosts of "Hooper's Gardens," with patronage and derision, as "those absurd people, the Tallboys, and their dreadful menagerie!"

The weather had suddenly become several degrees warmer, and the party travelled by night, arriving in the early morning at Mettapollium, not far from the foot of the towering ghâts; here after *chotah-hazri* they entered the mountain railway, that climbed, and wound, and climbed again, till it dragged itself up to Coonoor—which seemed to be awaiting it, as it lay hanging over the edge of the great plateau—unquestionably one of the most wooded, beflowered, and picturesque, Hill stations in Hindustan, and the home of not a few retired Anglo-Indians. Here, the Tallboys decided to halt for a day or two, whilst "Woodford" was prepared for their reception.

Instead of taking the mountain railway, Mrs. Brander

had elected to ride up the old ghât, on her big black waler, Bonny; and Mallender promptly volunteered to be her escort. He liked Nancy, she was the best of company, always so cheerful, good-natured, and ready to enjoy everything that came in her way; one of those rare people, who go through life with a happy and contented heart.

The heat, in the narrow gorge at the foot of the mountains, was stifling; the very bananas and bamboos looked wilted, and faint. As the pair rode between dense masses of acacia, babul trees, Palmyra palms, and thickets of heavy jungle, their horses were bathed in sweat, there seemed scarcely a breath of air; but by gradual degrees, as they mounted the rocky old road with its endless twists, and sudden steep ascents, the dank hot-house atmosphere fell away, and mile by mile they ascended into another, and cooler, climate. The narrow bridle-path lay through a primeval forest, carpeted in places with moss and maiden-hair; here and there, the tree-trunks were hidden by gigantic ferns, the sound of running water was never absent, crystal clear streams splashed and tumbled and made tinkling music in the dim light, as they hurried down the hill-side, through a tangle of rock, twisted roots, and creepers. Meanwhile the riders breasted a precipitous road, that carried them from the tropics to an English summer; heavily laden coolies, donkeys carrying wood, and now and then a portly native on a pony, were all they encountered as they proceeded, and fitfully discussed the recent season, and its most interesting, or remarkable events.

"Talking of events," said Mrs. Brander, "last evening, I saw Barbie Miller driving with Colonel Harris in his Stanhope phaeton; he looked as pleased as Punch, and she, as if she were on her way to execution; I fancy that match is settled, and for once, Aunt Fanny had no finger in the pie!"

"No, of course not," assented Mallender, but he said

no more.—There ensued a pause, lit by the memory of a girl, leaning against a tree with a drawn, white face and dazed blue eyes, saying, " Oh, *you* don't know—you cannot understand ! "

" You liked her, didn't you ? " questioned his twenty-first cousin.

" Yes,—but I am sorry to say, Miss Miller does not like *me*. She has wonderful pluck in the saddle, it's a pity she can't show some of it in her own family."

" Ah, it is so easy for us to talk ! You little know Mrs. Miller ; a woman as hard as the nether mill-stone, as pitiless as Fate, and she has a strong backer in Mrs. Fiske. Poor Barbie has no chance against two such allies."

" I don't see where Mrs. Fiske comes in ? " argued Mallender.

" As adviser. Mrs. Miller was once upon a time her bridesmaid, and although she publishes a striking and historical record of her character, declares that her bridesmaid was a bully from her youth, never would allow anyone near her to be happy, and adds, many later, and more lurid particulars, yet they are close friends ! "

" I can't stand Mrs. Fiske, and she always smiles—if you can call it a smile ! at me, and looks as if she knew a *lot*, and we had some guilty secret between us ! "

" I understand, and sympathise with your feelings respecting Mrs. Fiske—I am with you there ! She says such spiteful things to my face, that they leave me beyond the power of a coherent retort. But why do you say that Barbie dislikes you ? "

" Because lately, she won't speak to me."

" Imagination ! She has been flung so violently at men's heads, that naturally she avoids them, for which, I confess I do not blame her ;—among women, she is different."

" And once upon a time she was different with *me !* —we were quite chummy out hunting, or paper-chasing —she's a nailing good rider,—one day, she got a nasty toss, and I took her home,—Lord, what a place ! "

"I can imagine it."

"I doubt it! We found lots to say to one another, as we toiled along to Vepery, afterwards too—at *chota-hazri's*, at the gardens; then all of a sudden, the young lady dropped me like the traditional hot potato!"

Mrs. Brander burst into a ringing laugh, and again repeated, "Imagination!"

"No," he replied with some heat. "The last couple of weeks, Miss Miller avoided me on purpose,—you remember the finish at the paper-chase at the Mount, and breakfast at the Artillery Mess, under the banyan tree? When I spoke to her there, she just looked me straight between the eyes, and administered the dead cut."

"I must say you amaze me! I can only suppose, that Mrs. Fiske has given you a bad character."

"She knows nothing about me!"

"I would not be so sure. She knows all about *me!* my age, fortune, where Tom proposed, how much I pay my dhobi, and which of my teeth are stopped."

After a silence, during which they threaded their way among a horde of heavily-laden pack ponies, charcoal burners, and coolies—almost bent double under incredible loads of baggage—Mrs. Brander resumed:

"I'm so sorry for Barbie, her little white desperate face comes before me, if only I could have done something to snatch her from Colonel Harris, but Tom says, I'm always too ready to rush in, where angels, etc., etc. Aunt Fan is an angel,—but even she is afraid of those two women, that like the giants in the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' bar the road to Barbie's liberty. Uncle Fred is fond of Barbie, she is his favourite girl in all Madras, but he dare not interfere in other people's family concerns. He, however, goes about, telling everyone that he and James Harris are the same age!"

"Much good that will do Miss Miller!" scoffed her companion.

"Well, we are getting off our old bachelors. I suppose the next wedding will be Sir William's—he is older than Uncle Fred."

"What Sir William ?—Sir William Bream ?"

"Yes, our very own Sir William, with his extraordinary and imposing power of saying things, with nothing to say. Why do you look so surprised ?" and her gaze rested upon him with impressive steadiness.

"You don't mean that Mrs. Villars would marry him !"

"I refuse to commit myself, I don't mean to say anything, except that Mrs. Villars will make a sensation in our Blue Mountains, and have a good time. Who is so absolutely free, and independent, as a beautiful rich young widow ? at least, I hope she is rich——"

"Why do you hope that ?"

But Nancy Brander touched her horse, and cantered on ; she was not disposed to tell tales, or to reply.

"Merely because she showed me a bill from a Paris house, for nine hundred pounds, and assured me, that she had no more idea than my Mab, how it was going to be paid ! or where the money was to come from !"

By eleven o'clock the equestrians had arrived at Under Cliff Hotel, Coonoor, and there found the remainder of the party, all comfortably installed, sitting in the verandah, imbibing draughts of deliciously cool air, and looking forward to a late, and solid, breakfast. The early afternoon was abandoned to resting, unpacking, and novel-reading, but about four o'clock the Tallboys and their guests reassembled for tea.

Not a few acquaintances were "up," and passing through,—these included Colonel Molyneux and Forbes, the great shikari. Mrs. Villars, who had changed her travelling dress for a becoming toilet, was talking to them, when Mallender joined her. She gave him a radiant smile—her smile conveyed to many, the secret, that "you, and you *only*, are my friend" ; undoubtedly she had a wonderful charm—which is another name for power—and in her delicate hand, it frequently proved an irresistible weapon. At the moment, she was carrying on a bantering conversation with the mighty hunter.

"You know perfectly well, that you hate all this,"

she said, indicating the smart gay groups, who were scattered along the verandah, drinking tea. "You prefer black coffee, and leathery chuppatties in the jungle, you know you do!"

"Yes, I must confess that I enjoy the jungle," admitted Mr. Forbes, who found it not unpleasant to be chaffed, and singled out, by this beautiful creature in white serge, with the eyes of a fawn, and the sun throwing glints on her wealth of red-brown hair. "But then, I'm a semi-savage—and an old bachelor," he added boastfully.

"Worse—a woman-hater!"

"No, no, Mrs. Villars, but I admit that I would as soon look at a fine pair of horns, as at a fine pair of eyes," and his glance was almost a challenge!

"Really?" with a gay incredulous laugh. "What an odd taste! The only horn that appeals to me, is a coach horn. Are you making any stay?"

"No, a couple of days, and then I'm off to the Anna-Mullays after a bison. When I was at home, I got a letter from an old pal of mine, a Kurumba shikari, and he told me of a remarkable, in fact, matchless head."

"Still on the animal's shoulders?" she enquired airily.

"I hope so, I've come straight out to pot him."

"Rather a long aim!"

"Oh, I think nothing of that. I've gone to Arabia for lions, to Java for a particular deer. My collection of heads is my hobby."

"One would think you were a Dyak!"

"*You* need not reproach me, dear madam. What are my heads, to your scalps?"

"I declare you are becoming quite agreeable and complimentary! but no doubt you are in great spirits at the prospect of leaving us. You know, you are longing for the solitude of the deep, hot, smelly jungle; once there, *we* cease to exist."

"I won't agree with that; but the jungle has its allurements, too." Then suddenly turning to Mallender. "Think of the cool early mornings, when the birds begin

to stir, and the bamboos to whisper; oh, you society fellows miss a lot! *You* never see the dense, virgin forests, peopled with half-tame animals, and impassable, except by game tracks." He paused, and looked steadily before him, as if his eyes beheld some rapturous vision.

Mrs. Villars now rose, carefully brushed the crumbs from her gown, and said, in her soft drawling voice:

"There is quite a nice little jungle near this; I explored it this morning. There are paths, and flowers—possibly, a stray animal or two. I mean the garden. Come with me, Captain Mallender, and perhaps *I* will whisper to you like the bamboos. At any rate, I can introduce you to lovely views, a fountain, and a summer-house!"

Mallender promptly accepted the invitation, and as he descended the steps, in the lady's wake, the old shikari looked after them, and muttered half aloud, "*Got him!*"

CHAPTER XIII

As Mrs. Villars gracefully proceeded along a path, not wide enough for two abreast, and offered her companion a full view of a perfectly-fitting back, and coils of lustrous hair—she had several new ideas simmering in her head. She liked the handsome boy, now treading in her footsteps, and had flirted and amused herself with him, as was her custom; also, because Fanny had given her a somewhat shamefaced hint to keep Geoffrey fast, and urge him to accompany his friends to the Hills, adding mysteriously, that there was an important reason for detaining him. When she had asked for further particulars, Fanny replied:

"It is a family matter. Much depends on tying the young man to my, or rather to *your* apron strings."

"And so I am to play the syren?"

"Yes, my dear, a nice, amiable, harmless syren," and to this she had agreeably consented.

But now, as the lady preceded her slave, stepping delicately over the ground, in her high-heeled grey *suède* shoes, she asked herself, why she should not play the syren in real *earnest?*

Relieved from Sir William's formidable presence, and the questioning glances of his torpid, but suspicious eyes, she felt once more young, and free! Of course, there was Sir William's great fortune figuratively at her feet, but its master was old, unattractive, and irritable; when they were man and wife, and he had paid her debts, possibly he might not be so devoted or so docile.

As for Geoffrey Mallender, dear, simple boy! he was the soul of chivalry, generosity, and good-humour. He had a fine old place, and seven or eight thousand a year. Why should she not have, so to speak, "a new deal," be serious, encourage his timid homage, and marry him? It was true, that she was fourteen years his senior, but who would suspect it? Like her family, she had been endowed with the priceless gift of perennial youth. Fanny, her old school-fellow, who knew her age to a day, would possibly disapprove, and make difficulties. After all, why should she consider Fanny Tallboys? Naturally her first object was her own interest.

"Do let us sit down here," she said, turning about at last, "and look at this glorious blue view! Blue mountains, blue valleys, and blue sky, all in different shades, —and sniff the scent of roses, and heliotrope, and now, my dear boy, I am going to have a nice little talk with you."

"That's right, what is it about?"

"I want you to tell me, why there is such a silent but strenuous effort to keep you from leaving the Tallboys?"

Mallender looked at her smiling eyes, broke off a twig of lemon verbena, but made no reply.

"Fanny has some particular reason for not allowing you to run away."

"Has she?" he answered with a bantering air.

"Don't evade my questions, there's a dear, but tell me the truth? I am so *safe.* Are you about to ruin your life by a foolish marriage?"

His reply was a boyish and spontaneous laugh ; then seeing her face of grave reproach, he added :

" I don't want to go away, you may be sure,—but I may have to leave—as a duty. I'd tell you all about it, like a shot, but it would not interest you, you'd only chaff me."

" *Chaff* you ! " she repeated indignantly. " Do you imagine you are talking to Nancy Brander ? anything that concerns you, will interest *me*. Won't you tell me ? " Suddenly her voice sank to a low enticing whisper. Behold Mrs. Villars in her most dangerous character.

" Yes, I will another time," he glanced about. They were not alone in this exquisite spot. Various other couples were roaming in the lovely garden.

" But, Geoffrey, you will never have a better opportunity ! " she urged. " Give me your confidence, and perhaps, if you are very, very good, I will tell you something, that I know will please you ! " and she smiled at him, with half-closed eyes.

" All right," he agreed, " confidence for confidence—exchange is no robbery, my business is about——"

At this critical moment, when Mrs. Villars was leaning forward with parted lips, a white figure came prancing towards them ! It was Chinna-Sawmy, holding aloft a telegram between his two thumbs. Here, indeed, was a most perverse little incident !

The baffled lady drew back murmuring, " What a bore ! well, another time then," and rose slowly to her feet. " I think I must run in now, and see what Kemp is doing, and dress for dinner. I believe it is at the ghastly hour of half-past seven. We will meet in the verandah later—and continue our little *talk !* "

" Yes, all right," then he tore open the envelope, unfolded the slip of paper, and read :

" *He is found, return to-night. Shumilal.*"

For a moment, Mallender felt stunned, and stared stupidly at the telegram. Then by degrees he collected his wits and turning to Chinna-Sawmy, said :

" Run and find out when the next train leaves."

To Anthony who had followed the wire, " I am going back at once. Put my kit together again, and send it to the station."

" Train leaves in one half-hour," was Anthony's prompt reply. " I knowing the place well,—master will have to be quick."

Colonel Tallboys shaved twice a day, and was carefully operating with a new safety razor, when he heard a hurried thump on the door of his dressing-room, and Geoffrey entered, with a coat on his arm, and a cap in his hand.

" I say," he began abruptly, " I've just got a wire, my marching orders,—and I'm off at last ! "

Colonel Tallboys stood transfixed, razor in hand ; one half his face white, the other pink. If the matter had not been so desperately serious, Geoffrey would have laughed at the spectacle.

" Don't be vexed," he urged anxiously, " don't take it so hardly. I expect I'll get through in a week or two and——"

His cousin at last found breath and voice.

" I take it hardly—damned hardly," he burst out in a high shaky key. " It means your ruin ! thanks to your infernal pig-headed obstinacy. Of course if you *are* mad, you are your own master—I can't stop you. Here," stirred by a sudden access of fury, he rushed to the door, and wrenched it open, " Go—go ! I never want to see you, or hear of you, again ! "

Completely taken aback, Geoffrey stared incredulously at his furious relative, then walked blindly out of the room, and sought his cousin Fanny.

" I'm going," he said, " the telegram is urgent, and I'm just off, I'll write, of course. Wish me luck, and God bless you, Fan."

For a moment Mrs. Tallboys surveyed him with amazement. Then she put her hand on his shoulder, and tears stood in her eyes.

" So the sword has fallen at last ! Oh, Geoffrey, do be careful,—do be prudent. You have told Fred. I heard his voice just now—I'm afraid he is vexed."

" More than vexed, he washes his hands of me ! "

" Oh, that's only his way, when he is angry. He will get over it all right. Meanwhile, we are always your friends, bear this in mind, and, Geoffrey," smiling through her tears, " though I hate and fear the thought of your going, and would do all in my power to hold you back, yet I don't *blame* you, and whatever happens, you return to us," and she kissed him with warm affection.

After these farewell visits, the parting guest hurried away to the office, in order to settle his bill—only a half day,—and as he was gathering up change, a light hand was laid on his arm, and looking round, he beheld Mrs. Villars, who for some reason appeared to be strangely unlike herself ; she seemed excited, flurried, —and if he dared to use the word, dishevelled !

" I *must* speak to you," she began breathlessly. " Come into the sitting-room for a moment," and as they entered, she turned round abruptly, and faced him. " Oh, Geoffrey, what *is* this I hear ? Is it true, that you are leaving us ? " she asked, with tragedy in her voice.

" Yes, I'm bound to go," he answered decisively.

" Don't, don't ! " she pleaded, " Geoffrey, I implore you to think twice, before hurling yourself to ruin. Your cousin has told me, he is simply frantic."

" But I'm ruined already, if it comes to that, as far as money is concerned, and I intend to see this thing through."

" It means beggary, and madness—it does, it does," she reiterated, with passion. " I ask you, I beg of you, I beseech of you, to stay—stay for *my* sake," and she flung her arms round his neck, and gazed into his face, with two lovely, liquid, irresistible eyes.

Lena Villars was on her mettle, she was using the most effective and deadly weapon in her armoury. Should she suffer this young man to escape, to go headlong his own way, her prestige in her inner consciousness would be for ever dimmed !

Such eyes as hers, were powerful persuaders. Mallender was young, with hot blood racing through his veins ; he caught his breath sharply, and was about to yield. The perfume of the syren's hair, her close and delicious proximity, intoxicated his senses. At this critical instant, he beheld a face, and two hands numbering twelve fingers pressed against the window, making urgent signs. With a firm but gentle movement he put the sorceress quietly aside, caught up his cap, and ran out of the hotel.

As the fugitive hurried to the station, he was aware of fleet footsteps pattering behind him ! he turned to find not Lena, but Nancy Brander, breathless, bareheaded, and wrapped in a long cloak.

"I was dressing," she panted, "*don't* look at me ! but I could not let you go, without a word. Here, I know the way, this is the ticket place, you will write, won't you ?" she continued in gasps, "and be sure, and let me know what happens !"

"Yes, of course I'll write, without fail."

"Tom comes up next week, and if Uncle Fred is still furious, remember that *we* will shelter you. Ah, you are just off—good-bye—and the best of luck !"

The last friendly face that Mallender beheld was the plain visage of Nancy, battling between smiles and tears, as she waved him a vigorous adieu.

CHAPTER XIV

In a totally different spirit to that in which he had quitted them, Mallender descended to the plains ; as in the silvery moonlight, he caught occasional glimpses of the old road, by which he and Nancy had ridden up that very morning, his heart felt sick. He was turning his back on all his friends ; on Lena, on a perfect climate, and retracing his steps to sweltering heat, and an unknown fate. Nevertheless he assured himself that if in one sense he was going the wrong way, he was actually on the right road at last !

Once more in Madras, Mallender, accompanied by his two retainers, put up at Spencer's Hotel, and as soon as he had rested, and recovered from the long double journey, set out for 805 Pophams Broadway; here he sent in his card, and asked to see the principal.

After some delay, he was ushered upstairs into a large dingy office; its shelves were packed with immense ledgers, and tin boxes; heaps of dusty receipts were filed, and stacked on the top of clumsy presses, the whole place reeked of an odour peculiar to Southern India—a combination of betel nut, cocoanut oil, aniseed, with a dash of ground coffee. The visitor was received by an elderly native, with dignified manners, who wore an enormous white turban of the very finest muslin, and was seated at a roll-top desk. In the background, were clerks in velvet skull caps, each and all exhibiting an appearance of extraordinary industry.

"Ah, Captain Mallender," said the principal, rising as he closed a huge account book. "The client of our honoured friends—Jaffer and Co."

"Yes, I got your wire soon after I arrived at Coonoor,—and returned by the next train."

"I'm afraid your friends must have been disappointed," observed Shumilal, and in his studiously bland voice there lurked the quality of unction.

"They were, but my business comes first, and they know that. And so you have news at last—you have found him?"

"We must still continue to go very slowly, and wait."

"*You* may!" cried Mallender, suddenly losing his temper between heat, mosquitoes, want of sleep, and annoyance, "but I refuse to do so; I must go ahead, and set the pace. I've been out here more than three months, I've paid you a hundred and fifty pounds down——" a clerk at a distant table raised his head, "I return in answer to an urgent summons and at great inconvenience, in hopes of immediate success; and you say I must wait. By Jove, I tell you, that I *won't* wait!" and a light shone in his dark eyes.

"But, my dear sir, we are doing our best," protested the other soothingly, "you know, it is a strange, and intricate business," he held out a pair of delicate and appealing hands.

"Yes, so you always say," continued the young man angrily. "I hope for your own sakes, that you have not made a fool of me?"

"Come, come, come, young gentleman, this is not good talk."

"No, and I won't give you good talk! I'm not out here in this country, and this furnace of a place, for humbug, and waiting, and 'good talk.' I'm here for action, for real serious business. I don't care how hard it is, so that I succeed in the end. If you have—fooled me I'll make it pretty hot for you, and so I tell you."

Shumilal drummed for an absent moment on the desk, then answered, with a coal of fire!

"Well, Captain Mallender, if you were not so impatient, I was going to give you first-class news, and inform you, that you are very near success."

"Oh! But why not say so before, instead of keeping me on the string?"

"Yes; and we believe, that he you seek, is close to you, at an old place twenty miles out; once a depôt for military—but now abandoned. In one of the bungalows there lives the gentleman you want; he is over fifty years of age. He shuns all society, he hides some weighty secret, he has been in India for many years; and if you are patient and cautious, you are bound to catch him. You will have to go out there, and put up at the Dâk Bungalow. Better take food, and servants, and provisions."

"All right!" said Mallender curtly, "but you haven't told me the fellow's name?"

"Smith, Major Smith; his cheques and bills are made out to John Smith."

"Very well, I shall start this evening. What do you call the place?"

"Panjeverram; and now that we are talking

secretly, tell me, Captain Mallender, do you expect to find your Uncle ? "

" No, but I hope to secure his murderer ; he has had a tremendous start, and a long respite, but please God, I'll lay my hands on him within a week."

" But if this man is not your object—I believe he *is*—but, we are all liable to mistakes, what then ? "

" Then, I shall still go on searching for the fellow I want, but your description seems to promise success."

" That is true. We will send you by hand to your hotel, a formal letter as a reference, and guide, and," rising, in order to close the interview, " we shall hear from you no doubt shortly."

" Yes, without fail," said Mallender, with emphasis. " Don't think me rude, but I hope I shall have no occasion to call again, and now I will wish you good day."

Mallender's next visit was to the bank ; here he asked for a statement of his account, and to know the amount of his balance ? After a considerable delay, a pale, smart-looking young man, came forward, and said :

" Your balance in hand, Captain Mallender, is exactly Seventy-two Pounds, Eighteen Shillings, and Nine-pence."

These tidings so startled the enquirer, that for a moment he stood speechless. Of course, on second thoughts there was some monstrous mistake ; he must have at least five or six hundred to his credit. But no, the practical, clear-headed clerk, produced the big book, and went steadily through the items. To each of these Mallender assented with a sinking heart.

" You see," said the accountant, " nothing has come in since the first of January,—and you have made some large payments."

This was the truth. How the money had melted ! He glanced over the column of figures. One hundred and fifty to Shumilal and Co., one hundred for Miss Sim, fifty lent to Wylie, fifty for a gold bag, one hundred for outlay of sorts ; subscriptions, wages, hire of motor,

presents, tips, one hundred ditto, ditto. Yes, the account was all right, or rather—all wrong.

A letter handed to him did not serve to raise his spirits. It came from his solicitors at home, and in neat type-writing, imparted this information :

"The firm of contractors who are now repairing Mallender, require a final advance, otherwise the work cannot be continued. Times are bad in the building trade."

When the advance was paid, his available funds were at an end ; he would have nothing coming in, for another twelve months ! This was indeed heavy news ; how was seventy pounds to last a man for a whole year ? He might borrow, the old family lawyer might lend him a few hundreds, or he could raise a mortgage on Mallender ; but was Mallender his to mortgage ? was not the property strictly entailed ?

Mallender's brain,—according to his own account, —worked slowly, and with difficulty, and he sat for some time, with these questions buzzing in his aching and bewildered head, then he rose, and with an abstracted salute departed from the bank, a grave and anxious wanderer.

CHAPTER XV

Accompanied by Anthony and Chinna-Sawmy, his luggage and many bundles, Mallender left Madras by rail at five o'clock. The carriages were crammed in the usual fashion ; natives of India have an insatiable passion for travel, and are absolutely regardless of heat, packed compartments, and semi-suffocation. The train dawdled through the suburbs, then away across hot dry plains, by palms, villages and temples, till at length it crawled into Panjeverram. Panjeverram, although but twenty miles from the City was a silent, forlorn, and forsaken, old place ; there was no sign of life or bustle at its modest humble station,—not even a *gharry* in waiting. The luggage and bundles were

therefore placed on a *tailer* (or hand-cart) and trundled off to the Dâk Bungalow, through a great avenue of banyan trees,—so closely meeting overhead, that they constituted a long black tunnel ; only a faint light here and there like fire-flies in a forest broke its cimmerian gloom. The little party did not encounter a soul, before they turned over a brick culvert, and found themselves in front of the rest-house. This was old, and out of repair ; its atmosphere, even that hot March night, felt damp ; and the air was heavily impregnated by an odour of mildew, mushrooms, and bats.

A visitor was evidently a precious rarity, and the venerable Dâk Matey was full of rapture, and eager and voluble apologies. He shouted orders to some unseen subordinate in the back verandah, and proceeded to light lamps and bustle about. He laid a newspaper as table-cloth, placed on it two candles in black bottles, and between these, a bunch of zinnias in a mustard tin ; a knife and fork and tumbler, produced from Mallender's tiffin basket, gave a business-like air to these preparations ; a pat of white butter, and a small bazaar loaf, were added by Anthony, who casually remarked that " he had just done kill one big snake, in Master's bathroom ! "

" Very bad that snake, but only coming after water," he explained, as he moved about unpacking, giving directions in Tamil to the hoary Matey, and goading him to frenzied exertions. Then turning to Mallender, with an air of authority, he said :

" Master better wash, and I bring soup."

The bedroom proved to be nearly as bare as the immortal cupboard of Mother Hubbard, and merely contained a charpoy, a chair, a battered punkah, and cobwebs,—thick as ropes ! The dinner also proved a disappointment ; soup of Worcester sauce and hot water, goat chops, the inevitable anchovy toast, and a small bottle of beer.

Mallender realised that he must adjust himself to the position, and get used to this sort of thing ! He had

fallen into fastidious ways, and been spoiled, and pampered, by the luxuries of Hooper's Gardens.

When the meal was over, and the newspaper had been ceremoniously removed, he drew a candle towards him and proceeded to re-read the letter of instructions, which had been duly delivered at the Madras hotel:

"Dear Sir,

"We have now the pleasure to forward by hand the information as required. Your gentleman, Major Smith, lives at Panjeverram where he owns a large bungalow, called the Nabob's House, and lives in great secrecy. The place is surrounded by high walls, and entered by a heavy wooden gate. Major Smith's affairs are managed by old servants, who cannot be *bribed;* he is rarely seen, sometimes not for years, but he is in Panjeverram *now.* He receives no visitors or letters, no more than if he was *defunct.* We believe that he is your man, and hope we are correct. We should add, that you will find it prudent to be on the spot, and that to gain admittance will be difficult; it may take weeks, or even months."

Mallender's heart sank. Months!—in this squalid bungalow, the resort of toddy cats, bats, and snakes.

"Perseverance must be rewarded," the letter continued. "If your servants can make friends with Major Smith's servants, it will be the thin edge of the wedge, but you must push, push, *push.*"

Having folded up this epistle, Mallender lit a cigar, and went out to pace the verandah, forgetful and regardless of reptiles, till he trod upon the dead snake, and uttering a word which begins and ends with "D," he kicked the limp body into the bushes, whereupon Anthony, who had been summoned, and stood at the doorway at attention, was moved to say:

"Master taking care, and never walking out of light. Other snake *always* coming, to look for lover!"

"Hang the snakes' lovers!" cried his master impatiently. "I called you to say, that I am likely to be here for some time, and you must send a coolie to Madras early to-morrow, to fetch stores, and other things from Oakes and Spencer's."

"Chinna-Sawmy can go," replied Smiler with an air of superb importance. "I can spare him, plenty things wanted. To-day all hurry and hurly-burly, no time to arrange. Nothing here, no filter, no charcoal, no matches, no cocoanut-oil, no—" spreading out his hands, "anything—but one old fool man."

"There is a bazaar, I presume?"

"Yes, but for native peoples only and half-castes, who live in the old bungalows—and never paying no rent. No one ever coming, but sometimes to see big big temple, and house opposite," pointing dramatically into the thick darkness, "where one English lady was murdered. Master, chase with knife, and cut throat!"

"There is one English gentleman here," said Mallender, "Major Smith. I want you to make acquaintance with his servants, I wish to meet him myself."

"Oh, yes, sir, I understand," replied Anthony, with a whole volume of significance in his voice. "That I can do! I shall get introduced—then I will introduce Master."

"I see you know what I mean,—and now you can go."

Thus dismissed, Anthony took his noiseless departure, and presently made one of the corpse-like figures, swathed in white, that were stretched on the ground—successfully wooing sleep, between the servants' quarters, and the cook's house.

Mallender remained alone, pacing to and fro, whilst the candles within burnt low, a distant pi dog howled, and bats made muffled noises, as they fluttered in and out of the verandah.

* * * * * *

Early the next morning, after a truly miserable night,—thanks to heat, mosquitoes and the skirmishing of toddy cats in the ceiling-cloth, the adventurer went

forth to reconnoitre, and make observations. He discovered an immensely wide road, with stretches of grass at either side, lined with magnificent banyans. Here and there a bungalow arrested the eye ; some were large and stately, some were insignificant ; some were thatched, some tiled, many—among a wild tangle of fruit trees, and long-neglected bushes of oleander, and jasmin—were falling into ruin ; one and all the miserable reminders of the opulence, and glories of the past. In India the elements assist old Father Time with amazing zeal and success. The blasting hot winds, the blistering sun, torrents of tropical downpour and the perpetual ravages of legions of white ants, soon occasion surprising changes in an uninhabited dwelling. At a little distance to the left, the explorer noticed a straggling bazaar ; still continuing the main road, he came to a house standing apart, and surrounded by a high and dignified wall,—such as might enclose an important monastic institution. The entrance was by a heavy iron-studded wooden gate, with a small postern.

Mallender walked slowly past, then turned, and retraced his steps, and finally halted before the gate. Within, was the man he sought ! How soon would he see him face to face ? How soon might he summon the law to his assistance ? Undoubtedly the criminal had found an admirable hiding-place ; here he lay, so to speak, entrenched, far from the madding crowd. Probably these solid walls had once encompassed the home and harem of some wealthy "Free" Madras merchant, in the good old times when Panjeverram was a fashionable resort, and the pagoda tree was laden with golden fruit.

For several days nothing happened, save that each morning the heat steadily increased, and like some bodily force descended upon the hard, cracked soil, and consumed all moisture. The only breath of air came from the flat plains behind the station, where spasmodic puffs of a scorching sirocco, suggested the gasps of some dying monster. Mallender, a prey to monotony and

prickly heat, sat in a stuffy little darkened room, under a listless old punkah, clad in pyjamas, smoking, and meditating ; listening to the roar of the hot wind, the thin rustle of whirling dead leaves, and realising that he was in for a long siege !

But such was his character, the more difficulties that confronted him, the more his courage and determination hardened. Each evening, he strolled past the Nabob's House like a policeman on duty, but the big gate was always shut fast, and the premises were silent as a cemetery. Meanwhile Anthony was craftily undermining the position, and making insidious advances to the native household ; in short, he exhibited cunning, which almost rose to the dignity of a talent !

" I have spoken to Francis the butler," he announced, mysteriously. " He is a big big man, with red turban and gold watch. He is Roman Catholic, and knows my father ! He say to me, ' Why your Master coming here ? ' and he look awfully cross. I say, ' Panjeverram too much interesting to gentleman, who make photographs to get money.' ' But he has two servants," he say, ' and brings Europe stores, and books, from Madras. —Truly *not* poor man ! ' "

" That must have stumped you, Smiler ? "

" ' No, no,' I say, awfullee quick, ' Stores and books *he* never pay for. Them a present from one charitable lady gone to the Hills, Mrs. Tallboys, and as for wages, I telling, Sawmy come as *my* friend only ; and I only taking eight rupees.' "

" Why, you sinner, I pay you thirty ! " exclaimed his master, aghast at this string of ready lies. " Anyway, he did not believe you, I'll swear."

" Suppose, he say I no tell truth, but what can do ? " raising his shoulders to his ears. " If Master will show work, I carry camera, and we pass bungalow five, six times, a day ; then there will be talk, and Francis, butler, will think, ' That Anthony, good Christian boy ; *he* never telling lies,' and will believe me ! "

" All right, Smiler, your character shall be cleared.

We will start out this afternoon, and I'll photograph the old temple, and lots of other objects, and make a reputation in the bazaar."

According to this arrangement, the big butler had now many opportunities of beholding the diligent gentleman with his camera and attendant passing continually to and fro; or taking snapshots of the most remarkable local objects. The fame of the photographer spread; Anthony exhibited attractive specimens among his acquaintances, and the train was fired! Mallender became known as "the picture-catching master," and not merely "the stranger, who had a *chokra* with four thumbs."

"Excuse me, saar," pleaded the counsellor, "but to-day, I think of plenty good business. Suppose we go, I and you, and knock loudly on big gate of Nabob's House, two hours after the midday rice—when all people have eaten well, and are full and contented; we will ask humble permission to take photographs. There are young folks within. I gave the portrait you took of me to their ayah; she liking, very, awfullee much,—and has doubtless shown to family."

Mallender thought the programme excellent, and proceeded to act upon it, that same afternoon. After long and loud hammering on the wooden postern, it was at last opened by a peon, and a glimpse of the interior premises was disclosed.

At the farthest end, stood an imposing red-tiled bungalow; between this and the gate was a garden, a well, and a tennis-court—where two boys were playing. Mallender saw no more, as the postern was suddenly darkened by a large turbaned figure. This presumably was Francis, looking alarmingly fierce, and majestic, who stepping into the road, closed the postern behind him with stern significance.

"Photographs—no," waving a beringed hand; "we do not want them, this private house only—please not to trouble, and to go *away*."

The fiat seemed irrevocable, and Geoffrey's hopes sank to zero, when as Francis reopened the door a child's

golden head was thrust out, and she called in a shrill voice :

" Francis, why you make all this bobbery ? We are going to be done and *I* say so ! "

" You go back, missy," he answered angrily. " Naughty girl,—you go back."

" Yes, we must, we must ! " she screamed. The petition was supported by shouts, and a far-away female voice was heard in shrill expostulation. Then the door was violently slammed, and the scene in every sense closed.

As the defeated schemers were moving slowly homeward, a servant came panting behind them.

" You are to come," he called out, breathlessly. " The Miss has given permission."

When the impostor and his satellite crossed the vast enclosure, he noticed fine horses picketed in the open stables, Nellore cows, and a motor ; also flocks of pigeons, a luxuriant well-watered garden, with patches of luscious green lucerne, and trees of guava, pomegranate, and bananas.

In the verandah were two lads, nearly as dark as Chinna-Sawmy, with sleek black hair, and beaming eager faces. There was also a little girl with clouds of golden locks, and singularly arresting beauty, a prim elderly European woman with a long upper lip, and a flat figure encased in a stiff print gown, and Black Francis—a mute, hostile, presence. Besides this group on the verandah, there was also a large collection of retainers, who were apparently not entitled to a footing in the house.

" They tell me ye take photographs ? " interrogated " the Miss " in a high lachrymose Cork accent.

" Yes, all sorts. I came out here to do the temples, but I'm glad of any job," replied Mallender, now lying with the fluency of Anthony himself.

" Well, these children have been bothering the life out of me, so I suppose I bid to let you take them," and she glanced at Francis, who represented as he stood a living thundercloud.

This permission was received with rapture by the young people; the boys made diabolical grimaces at each other, and the little girl flung her arms round the neck of "the Miss" and nearly strangled her with a hug.

"Oh, well, ye can do a group," she gasped, "and if it comes out all right, we may have the bungalow."

"Yes, and the horses and dogs, and the new motor, and the monkey!" supplemented the child, as she clapped her hands, and skipped about.

"Now, Mota, you be quiet," commanded "the Miss"; then turning to Mallender, and pointing to his portfolio in Anthony's hands, 'I'd like to have a look at your things, young man."

"Certainly," answered the photographer, "with pleasure."

"Ye talk like a gentleman, so ye do," she remarked, as she considered Mallender with a pair of sharp grey eyes.

"I—I," taken a little aback,—"have been fairly well educated."

"'Tis more than I have myself," she declared, "but edication on some, does be like diamond buckles on a pair of brogues; I misdoubt," glancing at his shabby kharki suit, "that ye have been a nice play boy!" and with this remark she sat down, and holding the portfolio in her lap went carefully through its contents, whilst Mota rested her chin on her shoulder, and the two boys leant over Mota. Fortunately for the adventurer, they were all three loud and unanimous in their admiration.

"Look at the big temple and the one-eyed beggar!" cried Mota, "and see Soomia with his buffaloes, and the old Dâk Bungalow Matey. Oh, let us be done at once!"

"I can take a group now," said Mallender, briskly.

"Shall I change, Dixie?" enquired the child, "my new lace frock?"

"No, no, ye will do finely as ye are, get your hair brushed, and you boys, Paul and Pedro, go and put on your jackets."

As Mallender adjusted the camera, he made a careful mental photograph of the situation. At the side of the bungalow, he noticed another entrance,—doubtless opening on the plains at the rear. The verandah walls were covered with horns and heads, chiefly of black buck and sambur ; comfortable chairs and tables, laden with books and papers, gave a homely touch to the scene, and gasping near the water filter, lay an elderly, well-bred, fox-terrier.

In the presence of a large and attentive crowd, the operator arranged his group, placing "the Miss" in the centre. As he allowed her to choose her own pose, she sat bolt upright, her chin elevated, and a large hand spread like a star-fish, on either knee. "The Miss" was supported by a boy on each side, whilst Mota reclined at her feet. As Mallender scrutinised the party, from under his black velvet cloth, he realised that the little girl was unquestionably of good birth, —judging by her delicate features, and well-bred air ; the boys seemed sharp and intelligent, and closely resembled one another, indeed now that he looked at them again, of course they were twins !

After a long pause, many injunctions to be "steady" and an authoritative "hush" from Anthony, his master uttered the word "*Now,*" and the cap was off.

Another snapshot followed, and then the operator carried away the plates into a specially darkened bath-room, accompanied by the truculent and suspicious Francis. As the groups were a success, and their price was moderate, "the Miss" suggested a view of the bungalow. This was followed by a full-sized reproduction of the monkey—a deplorable failure—and the old fox-terrier, who well-marked, and short of leg, had undoubtedly at some period of his career abandoned the shores of England.

With such a collection of plates, Mallender was well content ; he particularly wished to return again, and yet again, until he encountered and confronted the mysterious master of the Nabob's House.

It took some time to develop and print the plates, as they were sent to Madras, and three days had elapsed before the photographer once more presented himself at the wooden postern.

Meanwhile he heard from Anthony, that the sahib was at home; for Chinna-Sawmy had obtained a footing in the go-downs, thanks to thumb tricks, and his repertoire of new, and improper, Tamil songs! The photographs were approved, with acclamation, and their bearer received a boisterous welcome from the boys and Mota, who amazing to relate, was their own sister! They all became demonstratively friendly, not to say familiar, and asked Mallender where he came from? how much he earned? and, last but by no means least, his name? which he informed them was "Geoffrey."

"Geoffrey," repeated "the Miss"; "I knew a fellow of that name wance in the Roifles—his father had a baker's shop in Cork; bedad, he was a nice bhoy! breaking out of barracks, making away with his kit, fighting, and playing the fool."

Her reminiscences were disturbed by the young people, who swarmed about the camera, begging leave to take snapshots of one another, or to pull off the cap, and to this the photographer graciously consented,—anything to linger, and to gain time.

"Photography is pure foolery," declared "the Miss," "and I would say against it, only it makes a diversion for them, poor children, and days do hang terribly heavy in the holidays and the hot weather: the boys goes to Doveton College, in Madras. Ye might do a single one of Miss Mota here just as a surprise for her Dada."

To this suggestion Mallender willingly assented. The ready and delighted Mota was posed, told to hold up her chin, try and think of something very *nice,* and make a good picture!

As the photographer's head was buried under the black cloth, taking a final look at his pretty little sitter, he heard the sound of a ringing, spurred, footfall on

the verandah, a loud exclamation from the child, and a gruff voice, asking :

" What's all *this ?* "

Mallender hastily divested himself of his head covering, and for once in his life was struck absolutely dumb. The man in riding-kit, and sun topee, who was staring at him, might be Major Smith, in Panjeverram,—but in England, he was a certain Major Rochfort, with whom the photographer was well acquainted ! A good-looking, popular, middle-aged individual,—married to a great heiress. When Mallender was quartered in York, he had often met him in the hunting field, had dined at his house, and shot his covers.

Major Rochfort, for his part, stood transfixed, glaring at the intruder, as if he could not credit the evidence of his senses !

CHAPTER XVI

Major Rochfort's eyes blazed, his good-looking countenance had become dark, and congested ; at last he found speech, and in a voice choking with ferocity demanded :

" What are you doing here, sir ? Detective business, eh ? You shall explain this, Mallender," suddenly seizing him by the arm, " come inside ! " As he spoke, he kicked a glass door open with such force, that one of the panes was loosened, and fell on the flags with a tinkling crash.

When the master of the house had carried off the unlucky photographer, as it were a prey—his children and retainers stood staring at one another in a dumb amazement—in which curiosity had no small share.

Leaving his victim to follow, Major Rochfort stalked through a gloomy central room—studded with old-fashioned black furniture, and carpeted with a hideous native drugget—into a cheerful airy den, containing a big writing-table, several luxurious chairs, and many trophies of the chase.

"Now," he said, turning savagely on Mallender. "'Pon my soul, I've a good mind to shoot you! What the devil are you after? What do you mean, you prying young skunk, by putting your fingers into my private affairs, eh?" His face was livid, and streaming with heat, he was almost incoherent from passion.

"I know nothing—and want to know nothing—of your private affairs," replied the amateur artist who was white, but perfectly collected. "I came out here to look after my own business, and by rotten bad luck I seem to have tumbled into yours!" Then realising that it was desirable to make a clean breast, he sat down in the nearest arm-chair, and with the velvet cloth still in his hands, in a few short sentences, and a slow controlled voice, related the reasons for his trip to India, to Panjeverram,—and finally to the bungalow itself.

As he listened, his companion rapidly cooled. He mopped his face energetically, and exclaimed:

"I see—I see—a regular mare's nest! Well, your secret will be safe here, this," with an embarrassed grin, "is the house of secrets; but yours, is a crazy notion, yes, crazy, and will land you in lots of awkward situations, as bad or worse, than this."

"Yet the agent was so absolutely confident, and I have waited three solid months for information."

"Well, your agent made a pretty rotten cast! Your Uncle would be at least ten years my senior—I'm forty-five next June. But natives are no judge of age, you are either young or old, there is no medium; it's like the country itself, which has only night, and day—*no* dusk. But why go to a native firm at all?"

"Because I'm told, they always have one ear in the bazaar, where everything is known; and Europeans are so cut and dried, so unimaginative, and maddeningly slow."

After a short silence, Major Rochfort got up, and standing squarely before his companion, said:

"Look here, Mallender, I'm most awfully sorry I went for you like that just now; but naturally, when

I came across you incognito and being extremely anxious to conceal this little—er—establishment, I thought that by some incredible means Sophy had put you on! Lately, she has been asking questions, and making me devilish nervous. I began to think of anonymous letters, or that in some subtle and unexpected form she smelt a rat!"

Mallender's thoughts flew to the plain middle-aged lady, with a tribe of pet dogs, known to the world as Mrs. Rochfort.

"I can't imagine why you should suspect *me*," he answered stiffly.

"My dear fellow, when a man's in a deadly funk, he suspects everyone. You will forgive me, won't you, and dine with me to-night, and we'll have a good old jaw?"

At this moment the door opened, and a golden head was thrust in.

"Go away, Mota, run away," said her father, "I am busy now. You'll come, won't you?" to Mallender, "to show there is no ill-feeling, and eat my salt,—as you have done at home?"

"All right, I'll come at eight, I suppose?" said Mallender rising; then he went out to join Anthony in the verandah, and the pair departed together, followed by the eyes of the entire household,—including dog and monkey.

Mallender was in low spirits, he felt keenly disappointed, crestfallen, and dispirited. He had abandoned his best friends, spent a fortnight in squalid misery, dragged out the secret of another man, and all for nothing! He began to fear, that he had engaged in a struggle beyond his powers,—nevertheless he meant to hold on!

Later, he got into a white evening suit, and preceded by Chinna-Sawmy with a lantern, once more presented himself at the big bungalow. He now found it illuminated by many lamps, and was formally received in the gloomy drawing-room by Rochfort, his children

and "the Miss,"—wearing a gay spotted muslin, and an obtrusive gold watch, and chain.

Dinner was plain, but excellent; mulligatawny, pomphret, gram-fed mutton, cheese soufflé and fruit. The talk was loud, general, and unembarrassed. The boys were evidently devoted to their parent, and completely free from shyness. Possibly the young lady was a little spoiled; with crimped hair, and dressed in an elaborate white frock, she occupied the place of hostess, and flatly and insistently contradicted her father on more than one occasion. She however was a lovely child, and looked thorough-bred to the tips of her somewhat sticky fingers.

Mallender as he glanced about him, mentally contrasted the present, with the last occasion on which he had been the guest of his host. Then, he had sat at a table loaded with wonderful old silver and hot-house flowers, and was waited on by powdered footmen, in the company of Rochfort's prim English wife, and her titled county neighbours. Now, he was eating curried vegetables, under a slowly moving punkah, attended by black servants, and surrounded by a Madras family —which included a golden-haired imperious hostess, aged nine years.

As she passed her father's chair, dessert being over, Mota said, "You'll come soon, Daddy?" and she bestowed a patronising pat and kiss on the top of his somewhat thin hair. "We want to play spoof, so don't sit talking, talking, smoking, smoking!" and with this command, she vanished.

When the servants had also disappeared, Rochfort said:

"Draw nearer, try that Pondicherry claret, it's very sound, and light up. I want to talk to you, Mallender."

"All right," he replied, helping himself to wine, "go ahead."

"No doubt you are flabbergasted at my double life! —not a Sunday-school example for a young fellow, eh? At home, I'm Major Rochfort, a magistrate, married, no family; a busy man on committees, active in country

matters, a preserver of foxes, a chairman at political meetings, a steward at races and balls, and a model husband," he paused, deliberately helped himself to another glass of claret, and then went on:

"Here in a God-forsaken old Indian backwater, I am Major Smith, an idle slacker, and a model *father*. Now you shall hear the whole explanation."

Mallender threw himself back in his chair, crossed his knees, and prepared to listen.

"Twenty years ago, I was a subaltern quartered in Madras, a gay young bachelor ready for any mortal thing, and at a Sergeants' Ball I made the acquaintance of Maddalena de Rosa. She was a Eurasian about sixteen, and quite distractingly pretty. I was not a bad-looking chap myself,"—he was good-looking still—"and we fell in love on the spot! I shall never forget Maddie that night, with her pink dress, her little string of mock pearls, and her wonderful eyes! We talked,—though she was not much of a talker—her eyes did the business—and we danced together most of the evening. We met again, of course. I used to go to Vepery Church on Sundays, and tell the other fellows I was out duck-shooting. Well, in the long run, her grandmother settled it! There was no question of marriage,—but it was a real case of love. I took two months' leave, we went to the Hills, and were as happy as mortals could be. Later on, I hired a little bungalow, not far from the Fort. For some time, we had no family, then came twin boys, both unexpectedly *dark*, and I must confess, I was a good deal startled. Soon after this, the regiment was ordered home, and poor Maddie nearly broke her heart. To tell the truth, I felt pretty bad too! but I sold my rifles and ponies fairly well, and I had come in for a bit of a legacy, so I settled some money on Maddie, and an old native relative—a soucar chap,—bought this house for her, for a song! Her people came from hereabouts, and her grandmother agreed to live with her."

Major Rochfort paused, and poured himself out yet

another glass of claret, then looked across at Mallender and said :

" I hope I'm not boring you, am I ? "

" On the contrary, I am much interested. What happened next ? "

" I went home with the regiment, married Sophy Cosby, and left the service ; five years later, I returned to shoot in Travancore, and an irresistible temptation drove me to look up Maddie. I found she had remained faithful to her first love, and never married ; she was now twenty-four, and handsomer than ever. Well, on one excuse or other, I stayed month after month, writing home lies, going for short shooting trips, but always returning to Maddie. I was awfully fond of her ; somehow she and the boys made me a home,—and I was extraordinarily happy. She was so simple and gentle, and refined ; I'll swear Maddie had good blood, English or native, in her veins. At last, I was compelled to leave her, and three months after I got home, I had a letter to say a girl was born, and that Maddie was dead. The news came as a terrible shock, but I pulled myself together, indented the coffee estate, and I came straight back, to fix up things. By great luck, I heard of Mrs. Dixon, a sergeant's widow, who was respectable and trustworthy, but stranded, and I engaged her as nurse and housekeeper, and though she has not much education, she has done me rattling well."

" Yes, I should say so," agreed Mallender, " and of course you are seldom at Panjeverram ? "

" No—worse luck ! Every two or three years I come out to see my coffee, that's what I call it. I may tell you, that I don't own a bush ! but I have a planter friend, and confidant, one Hector Fraser. I write from his estate, but I come here, and live with the children, I get capital snipe and teal shooting in the paddy fields and tanks hereabouts, and now and then, I go off, and do a week in the jungle—but, my heart is with my little family."

" Yes, naturally."

" Of late, I've had an awful idea, that Sophy has

her suspicions ; she cross-questions me so closely about my coffee and crops. I made a bargain with her, after Maddie's death, that every three years, I was free to spend six months on the estate—the—er—the master's eye, you know ! Recently it has seemed to me that my wife has been looking at me curiously ; of course this may only be my own guilty conscience ! And she told me, before we parted, that this is the last time I am coming out here—*alone*. She wishes to visit the estate, and thinks it must be *so* interesting. I'm half afraid she will keep her word, and when she sees the coffee,—there will be the devil to pay ! I dare say she'll divorce me."

"Can she ? I don't know much about such matters, but I'd say not."

"Well, she can stop supplies, and make things deuced unpleasant, and that's not the worst."

"No ? I should have said it was."

"There's Mota, my little darling girl—she is a beauty, eh ? "

"She is, indeed," agreed Mallender. "No two opinions there ! "

"And looks quite Europe ; not like the poor boys. They are bright young fellows, the image of my father : what would *he* have thought of his two copies in black ? He was a terribly straight-laced man, long family prayers, no theatre, no wine—he would not even allow mustard on the table, because it was a stimulant ! I was kept so cruelly tight, that I broke out, of course. The boys go to Doveton College, and this is their holidays. They are clever little chaps ; I get capital reports of them both, ultimately they will find good billets, and be all right. It's little Mota I'm thinking of. She learns next to nothing beyond reading and writing, and the love of her own way ; not a bit like her mother there—takes after mine. The child ought to go to England, and the boys too. She'd be accepted ; but how could I account for *them ?* I've saved a little, and made my will, but if anything happened to me, what would become of the children ? "

Rochfort's voice trembled, his eyes were misty. It was difficult to realise, that here was the identical Rochfort, known at home for his sunny humour, and natural geniality; or that the cheery smart man of the world, was the same as this stricken parent, with the anxious face, and voice shaken with emotion.

"By Jove, Mallender, it's true, what the Bible says, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'! Many a night I lie awake puzzling my head about these kids. You are a sensible chap,—bar one subject,—and can see into a question better than I, who am always looking at it; what do *you* advise?"

"I advise you to tell your wife!" was Mallender's prompt reply.

"Just the last thing I'll ever do!" and he banged the table with his fist, and made the glasses dance.

"But why not? she is lonely, she has no near relations, heaps of time on her hands, and seems fond of young people."

"She would not be fond of Pedro and Paul, she'd lock them up for fear they should be seen,—or send them to the Zoo!"

"Well, just think it over! it's what I'd do, if I were in your shoes. You need not let anyone else into the secret; say they were children of an old friend—who—er—had married unfortunately. You might even make her a Begum!"

"No thank you, my boy, your measures are too drastic. To-morrow you leave the Dâk Bungalow, and come and stop with me, seeing that you have drawn this cover blank. Anyway, stay and shoot a week or two; I may be able to give you a leg up, my butler Francis knows the Presidency to the bone."

"You are very kind, Rochfort,—but I ought to be moving on."

"Yes, you ought," he assented, rising as he spoke, "come along into the verandah, the children are waiting for us to play games."

CHAPTER XVII

Major Rochfort had not much difficulty in persuading his friend to abandon the Dâk Bungalow, and take up his quarters with him; and Geoffrey parted without regret from the mildewed, rat-hunted chamber, and toothless old matey—whose dishes were invariably seasoned with a "dirty cloth" taste! As he beheld his belongings installed in a large comfortably furnished room, containing a cot draped with snowy mosquito curtains, a writing-table, and an almirah, he asked himself the question, "Am *I* too becoming a sponge?"

The guest was made warmly welcome by "the Miss," or Mrs. Dixon, who assured him, that "all her born days she loved the Army!"

"Sure, an' wasn't I reared in the service, and married into the Roifles," she announced in a high querulous key, "and it does me heart good, to be in the same house with two fine soldiers, like the Major, and yourself."

As for the Smiths, all three had fastened their affections upon "Jeffie" as they called him; he played tennis with the boys, and taught them to box, and suffered Mota to take photographs, and learn to print them. Extravagant was her pride when she produced a picture of her father, with white eyes, and a perfectly black face!

Mallender had written to Fanny, and to Mrs. Villars, but so far had received no reply. And with grief it must be confessed, that for the first time in their married life, Fred and Fanny had had "a few words," and these "words" were on the subject of Geoffrey. In answer to his wife's tearful pleadings, Colonel Tallboys, bubbling over with wrath replied:

"Fanny, I forbid you to correspond with that fellow,

or to receive his letters; the pinch of indifference, and some real hardship, will soon bring the young idiot to his senses! I won't have him pitied, and coddled. Now, Fan, you need not argue. I won't listen to excuses. After all, he is *my* relation—not yours. When did *I* ever try to come between you, and the Bonds?"

This argument was unanswerable, and Fan, who knew that her husband could be very firm, and "bossy" on occasions, said no more.

As for Lena Villars, she had done with the young man; his unceremonious escape, without even a parting word, had wounded her vanity too deeply. She, who had hitherto believed that no man (and she chose) could resist her! Added to this, was the wild tale she had heard from Colonel Tallboys. The lady listened to his grievance with rapt and touching attention. So this rash obstinate boy was practically penniless, and had flung himself into a pursuit, that could only overtake derision, and ruin. He was a charming fellow, when he was sane, and danced like an angel, but she had no wish to set eyes on him again,—nor would she ever forget him.

Mrs. Tallboys dutifully bowed to her lord's commands, and wrote no letter, but she sent Geoffrey a little registered parcel, containing her treasured talisman—a curious old Greek coin with a hole in it. When Mallender unpacked the gift, he said to himself with a broad smile:

"Surely, between Sawmy's thumbs, and this talisman, I am bound to succeed!"

He had interviewed Shumilal, and overwhelmed him with reproaches,—these ran as lightly off the Agent, as if he were the proverbial duck!—and for his part, he silenced his client with clamorous condolences, sympathy, excuses, and dazzling promises of eventual triumph.

"We are hard at work on another line," he announced, "and for failure, *no* charge is made. We will communicate most important news, at a very early date."

"I don't believe in your Jaffer and Co." said Major Rochfort as he and his guest paced the garden together one moonlight evening, when the young people had retired. "I'd be a better help myself—on the principle of set a thief to catch a thief. I am up to lots of dodges, I understand how to cover my tracks, or to bolt for my hole, like a rabbit."

"Yes, I suppose you must be pretty smart," assumed Mallender.

"I am," he rejoined emphatically. "When Sophy is bound for Egypt—she generally winters there—I drop her at Port Said and come on to the estate, put in a couple of days with Fraser, and then double down to the kids."

"How often have you been out?"

"This is my fourth trip, since Mota was born. You see, I hate to miss the hunting. This year, I'm out a bit late—but I don't want the Smiths to forget their old Daddy."

"No, but when they grow up, how will it be?"

"Ah, that's the rub, when they grow up?—especially when Mota grows up. My wife is as prim and as starched as they make 'em; she looks like an old maid; but she loves children, and since she has none, she adopts dogs. You know the little brown Pom, she calls it her child, and her baby boy—it's pitiful!"

"Perhaps she would take to your children?" suggested Mallender.

"Never! For one thing, she's as jealous as the devil. If I speak to a good-looking woman more than once, she's down on me like bricks. When some confounded gossip told her that I was always riding with that pretty Mrs. Chester—you remember her—by Jove, she took to coming out herself! The ruling passion, stronger than the fear of death. Sophy can't ride for nuts, but she's plucky as the deuce. On the other hand, anything in the shape of a scandal, floors her; she knows nothing of life, nor of men's lives; poor dear, good woman, she thinks we are saints. I'm fond of

her,—though it was a *mariage de convenance,* and she has been awfully generous to me ; paid my debts, and gives me a free hand. If the secret of the coffee estate came to her ears, she'd get a separation like a shot, and I'd be fired out of the country ! "

" So far she has no suspicions ? " enquired Mallender.

" I'm not sure. I hope not. I write regularly from the Renapilly estate, a fellow there, that I can trust, posts my letters every mail."

" Do you know, I now remember, when I spent a couple of nights at your place, Mrs. Rochfort asked me a lot of questions about India, and especially about Madras ; I could not tell her much, nor anything of coffee estates, or if they were almost inaccessible. She enquired the easiest way of reaching those in the Hills. I said I supposed on horseback, or in a chair, carried by coolies."

" Then, my dear fellow, let me tell you, that unintentionally you did me a very bad turn," said Rochfort, as he carefully cut the end of a cigar—" what else ? "

" She asked me the length of the voyage, and for details respecting insects and snakes."

" Oh, *she* knows all about snakes, and scorpions ! I rubbed them in extra well. No, I don't really believe that Sophy will ever get further east than Egypt—she funks the Red Sea, and cobras. I say ! I suppose you know the Smiths have taken to you uncommonly ; it's good for the boys to meet another Englishman, and I see you've knocked some sound ideas into their heads. As for Mota, you'll be interested to hear, that she has decided *to marry* you ! "

" Well, perhaps I may wait for her ! By the way, they are waiting for us to play badminton in the big room. Shall we adjourn ? "

The weather was warming up, tanks were nearly dry, the grass withered, and the ground hard as a brick, —consequently there was no shooting.

Now and then of a late afternoon Major Rochfort motored his friend into Madras. He had purchased

the motor out of some race winnings, chiefly for the use of the boys going to and fro to college. As most of the community were in the Hills, or had gone home, or to Australia, no one recognised Mallender. He and his host went down to the Marina to catch a breath of the sea breeze, or to the band at the Luz, or to look on at tennis in the grounds behind the Chepauk Palace. Occasionally they took a turn in the shops. In one, Mallender was not a little startled to recognise, ticketed "a bargain," the very gold bag he had presented to Mrs. Villars. Could there be a mistake? Had it been stolen? he asked permission to examine it. Yes, it was the same, there were her initials faintly scratched by his own penknife.

"How did you come by this?" he enquired of the shop assistant, and the shop assistant on his dignity, loftily replied:

"By purchasing it,—we don't receive stolen goods."

"Of course, I know that. The reason I ask is, that I gave it to a lady, and I'm sure it's the same."

"No doubt, and the lady sold it. If you wish, I can give you her name. She was staying at Hooper's Gardens; she said she did not care about the pattern, and accepted two hundred and fifty rupees."

Geoffrey bowed, and walked out of the shop, feeling surprisingly crestfallen; and all the way back to Panjeverram, he proved a silent companion. Somehow or other, after this discovery, the magic of Lena Villars lost its hold upon his memory.

He had now been a fortnight at the big bungalow, and was enrolled as one of the household, joined in all their games and interests *con amore*, and was even accepted by the fox-terrier, and Francis—who had ceased to regard him with an air of scornful disparagement.

It was much too hot for any exertion in the daytime, the heat was fierce, all nature seemed somnolent; even the sparrows were in retirement, and ugly flying foxes, hung torpid, and motionless in their hundreds, from the banyan trees. Of an evening, the Smith family

revived. There were cards, puzzle games, and music on the gramophone; and Mrs. Dixon occasionally obliged with an Irish song; she had still a sweet haunting voice, and accompanied herself vigorously on the concertina. Subsequently there was family service, —an institution unfamiliar to Mallender. Major Rochfort read a chapter and some prayers to his household, which included Francis, Anthony and several Catholic servants,—and then the day for the young people was closed.

Although Mallender was adopted as one of the family, consulted about domestic affairs, domestic animals, and education, he did not intend to remain a fixture at the Nabob's House. On the contrary, he was in a condition of acute unrest; not only was he hoping for tidings from Jaffer and Co., but was pinning a certain amount of faith on Francis,—who according to his employer, had friends and relatives in all parts of the Presidency, and the details of every well-known, or even merely guessed at, scandal, or disappearance, at his finger-ends. It was a fact, that Francis and Anthony were laying their heads together, and elaborating a wonderful itinerary for Anthony's master.

One sweltering day just after tiffin, Mota brought in the dâk. She gave several letters to her father, and the Madras *Mail* to Geoffrey. After picking out the most interesting items of news, his eye fell casually on "Arrivals at Spencer's Hotel. Mrs. Rochfort and maid."

Could it be Rochfort's wife? He was about to draw attention to this announcement, when a glance at his friend restrained him. He was reading a letter; his colour had turned a greyish white, and great beads of perspiration rolled down his face.

"Good Lord, Mallender, she has come out! and I'm done!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "This letter, forwarded from the estate, is four days old. Sophy has been four days at Spencer's Hotel. Here—read it," and as he offered the letter, the paper rattled in his hand.

"SPENCER'S HOTEL, MADRAS.

"DEAREST ROBERT," it began,

"Won't this be a nice surprise for you? I am actually in Madras; do come and fetch me as soon as you receive this, for I'm nearly grilled alive, and poor Parsons is in a state of collapse. We only arrived to-day, via Colombo and Tuticorin,—such a scorching land journey! My old friends the Herrapaths who are going round the world, persuaded me to accompany them from Port Said, so instead of returning home, I faced the other way. Was I not courageous? I made up my mind instantly, and just came off—I thought it such a splendid chance, to visit your wonderful *coffee* estate. Longing to see you.

"Your loving SOPHY."

"She will have to know, now," remarked Mallender, as he returned the epistle. "No question of that."

"Certainly not," rejoined Rochfort, who had partly recovered from the first shock, "I shall face it out! Take her up to Ooty, tell her there is small-pox on the estate, and hustle her off home. You don't agree, I see."

"No, since you ask me, I don't."

"After all, it wouldn't work. No, on second thoughts, the Ooty club is full of planters, and they would give me away, as a rank impostor. Fraser, my friend, is in Australia; this is not the busy season. I see no escape," and he turned on his companion the eyes of a desperate man. "By God, I've a mind to put an end to myself!"

"What good would that do? you have to think of the Smiths. I see nothing for it, but to make a clean breast of it," answered Mallender firmly.

"Ah, it's easy to talk! I never could face her. I'm awfully sensitive, I—I—I've no moral courage," and he completely broke down, and presented a particularly distressing example of sheer cowardice!

His companion gazed at him in astonishment; Rochfort the smart, authoritative, society man, a popular

fellow, a leader in his own part of the world; here, on the other side of the globe, faced with a serious crisis, was weaker than many a woman, and sobbing like a child!

"Look here, Rochfort," he said at last. "Pull yourself together, write a letter, and I'll take it to her, this afternoon."

"Mallender," raising his head, "you *are* a friend! I warned you, that you little knew what you were letting yourself in for, when you started this crazy chase of yours,—here is an instance, you see! I'll get a stiff peg, and write, if I can, but I'm so confoundedly shaky, I don't know if I'll be able to form a word, no, 'pon my soul I'm no use at a crisis like this! an awful thing, that bowls you clean out. Here I stand between two fires, 'the kids and Sophy,' God knows I love them both,—but I'm bound to lose one, or the other. If I stick to the kids, Sophy will get a separation,—or what will come to the same thing; and if I go home with her, I'll never see the others again. So there it is! I'm in the devil of a mess," and once more, his voice broke.

"Write your letter, and confess yourself like a man," urged Geoffrey, "the longer you leave it, the worse it will be. I'm going out to order the car."

"Stop here, my old head on young shoulders! you stay and help me write it. What can I say? How in God's name am I to begin—I'll never do it."

"You must," rejoined Mallender, "and it's a job you'll have to take on alone. I'll give you fifteen minutes, while I have a tub, and change; don't let it be long; hold nothing back, and whatever you do, *make it plain.*"

CHAPTER XVIII

In Madras City it is generally admitted, that between three and four o'clock, is the hottest time of day; the sun seems to redouble and enforce his power, before he sinks beyond the palm trees and banyans in the west. At this hour, along an arid road, in the scorching malig-

nity of a hot wind, Mallender sped on his dangerous mission : so flaming was the air, that even an acclimatised driver felt withered, and blistered by its blasts !

Arriving at Spencer's Hotel, more dead than alive, the pallid emissary enquired for Mrs. Rochfort.

"Yes, saar, she is in," replied the smart Goanese attendant, "but who shall I say, saar ?"

"A gentleman to see her—no, I have no card."

Nevertheless the visitor was ceremoniously ushered into a lift, and swiftly whirled to the first floor.

After what seemed a long interval of waiting in an empty sitting-room, Mrs. Rochfort appeared. The lady had evidently dressed in haste ; her hair was damp, —as if recently dipped in water,—and she was violently struggling with a blouse button as she entered. The pitiless heat had undoubtedly tried her more than her visitor ; Sophie Rochfort looked plainer than ever ; so old, sallow, and fagged, as she stood for a moment uncertain,—then held out her hand.

"Oh, Captain Mallender, of all people !" she exclaimed, "fancy you and I meeting in India ! how *did* you know I was here ? I am expecting Robbie every instant, do sit down," pointing to a chair.

"Yes, I heard you had arrived," he began evasively, looking into his helmet, and wondering what the dickens he should say next ?

"Wasn't I energetic !" she continued volubly, "coming out as a surprise,—and so late in the season. You see, I was at Port Said, nearly half-way, and I took it into my head to visit this wonderful coffee estate. Robbie has always been so keen on it, and so full of it, now I shall be able to talk of it too, and to share his interest !"

"Um—yes—of course," murmured her visitor ; but his tone was faint and dubious.

"Do excuse my toilet !" she chattered on, "I really was not prepared for this furnace, and until I landed here, I'd no idea of the miseries of prickly heat !"

"I know, it's a bad time," agreed her visitor ; "mostly everyone is in the Hills now."

"The Hills! I'm simply dying for the cool mountain air! if Robbie does not come soon, I intend to start for his estate this evening, or very early to-morrow. I have found out the trains, and transport, and am all packed. I'm afraid my letters have missed him—such a funny casual post! By the way, I know you have left the service, how do *you* happen to be in Madras? Where are you staying?"

"Now for it!" thought Geoffrey, bracing himself. "I'm staying with Rochfort just at present—in fact—he sent me to see you."

"Then," rising hastily, "he is ill! Oh, why did you not say so before? I know you mean kindly, trying to break it to me, but take me to him at once! Is it serious—is it—*cholera?*"

"No, Rochfort is all right, I assure you," said Mallender, also rising; "you have no cause for any anxiety on that score,—but—I am the bearer of a letter," slowly producing it as he spoke, "that I am afraid will rather upset you, and, er—convey something of a shock——"

"A letter!" she interrupted, "let me have it?" and she almost snatched it from his hand, "I know, it's about money—Rob had some mysterious investments we,—we, are ruined!"

"Whether your husband is ruined, or not, lies entirely with *you*, Mrs. Rochfort."

"With me? Impossible! Of course my settlement——" then she tore the envelope open, and began to read. As she read, she became pale, then ghastly; at last she gave a long wailing cry, like some wounded animal, and sat down.

"Here, let me get you something," said Mallender eagerly; "shall I call your maid?"

"No, no," in a strangled voice, "bring me a glass of iced water, and call no one."

When he returned with the water, and Mrs. Rochfort had taken a few sips, she looked up at him and said:

"Of course *you* know what he has written?"

Mallender nodded. He felt as if he had suddenly become old, and responsible.

"About the Eurasian woman, and the children, and his—double life. Is it true?"

In spite of his own absolutely clear conscience, the young man coloured, and looked guiltily shame-faced as he answered:

"I believe it is, I came into his house by accident, and discovered his secret. He asked me to stay on for a time, and I've been with him a week or two. He only got your letter a couple of hours ago."

"Well," setting down the tumbler with a gesture of decision, "there is only one thing for *me* to do."

"To forgive him?" was the bold suggestion.

"Captain Mallender, for what do you take me?" she demanded with curt scorn.

"For a good, kind woman."

"A good—idiot!" she retorted fiercely.

"Listen to me, Mrs. Rochfort, for one moment, though I'm a stupid sort of chap, and no flier at talking. You know very well, that yours is the stronger character. Rochfort has lots of good points, but he is weak, and easily influenced. He is devoted to you—that I honestly believe,—and he is devoted to those kids. He shrinks from an awful scandal at home, and losing his friends, and position—er—and you."

"Oh—me!" she exclaimed with an outburst of bitterness.

"And," continued the pleader steadily, "his heart goes to those motherless children—you know, that *she* is dead. He cannot abandon them, and they adore him."

"I must say, he has an eloquent advocate!" she gulped.

"I'm afraid I'm a duffer and not much good; he wants one badly. He is too broken to speak for himself."

"Rob—with a family—out here all these years!—and no coffee estate," she repeated helplessly, "now I can understand *why* the plantation was such an absolutely impossible journey for *me!* And I thought I

had Rob's whole confidence, he consulted me about everything. He used to talk to me, by the hour, about bad crops, and troublesome coolies, and blight, and bone manure! Oh, why could he not tell me the truth?"

"Because he funked it," said Mallender simply.

"Yes, he always shirks disagreeables, and facing a situation, or having to say no. He gets out of things, or won't think of them. It is I, who have to speak or write; it was I, who had to give employés notice, dismiss a head keeper, and interview our nearest neighbour about a right of way."

She sat for a long time looking straight before her, and occasionally wiping away the perspiration that trickled down her wan face. Suddenly she asked:

"What are they like?"

"You mean the children. Wonderful, considering; well-brought-up, nice, straight, manly boys, that Rochfort says, take after his father—but very dark."

"Ah—like their mother!" and there was a faint note of satisfaction in the tone.

"No, I believe she was fair; but of course there is native blood, no denying it; the little girl has golden hair, and is lovely."

Mrs. Rochfort rose, and began to pace the room. Within the last ten minutes, her mind, her whole mental outlook, had been completely changed: amazement, incredulity, outraged confidence, and wounded affection, were each striving to make themselves heard. She felt as if her world had suddenly crumbled beneath her feet! That Robbie was a flirt, was always admitted, he was handsome and gay; he liked women, they liked him. His foolish little flirtations had undoubtedly vexed her but they meant nothing.—She knew in her heart, that Rob was fond of her, that she came first in his life—and now this thunderbolt had struck her! Robbie had deserted and deceived her; in the first years of their married life, he had abandoned her for an old love—a half-caste woman! The horror, the strangeness of the idea, made her giddy to contemplate.

He was no longer *her* Robbie; it was little short of a loss by death—in future, they must be strangers. In future, she would go through life alone, and what *would* people say? For instance, her prim, old-maidish cousins, who made nasty speeches, about "fortune hunters" and had been so openly envious of her handsome husband. As the poor distracted woman endeavoured to clear her mind, she walked to and fro, unconscious of the young man who stood by the window, following her movements, with anxious interest.

"What am I to do?" she moaned. "Oh, what *am* I to do?" and she wrung her hands.

"After all, Mrs. Rochfort, she is dead," urged Mallender; "it's not as if she were at Panjeverram; those children have been motherless for nine years. It would be different if he deceived you, and came out to see *her*—now would it not?"

Mrs. Rochfort vouchsafed no notice of this appeal, but ceased to pace the room, and murmured as if to herself, "What *am* I to do?"

"Give me a line to take back," suggested the delegate, "and put some sort of an end to Rochfort's misery. I have a car here, short measures are the most merciful."

"Is he really so miserable?" she asked, and she gazed at Mallender with piteous eyes.

"You should *see* him!" he answered forcibly, "I swear you'd hardly know him; since he got your letter, he looks like an old man!"

"You say you have a car here?"

"Yes—I'll get back in something over an hour; the man is on the rack—and the sooner I am off the better."

As Mrs. Rochfort stood and surveyed her visitor, her face assumed a strained, and irresolute expression, after a very long silence—she drew her hand across her wet forehead, and in a voice strangely thin and high said:

"If you will wait five minutes,—I will go with you!"

CHAPTER XIX

It was bright moonlight—an orange hot-weather moon—as Mrs. Rochfort and her escort, leaving behind them the sound of trams, tom-toms, and fire-works, sped smoothly out of Madras, and away into the sleepy country. Naturally everything she beheld was new to the lady, yet in one sense she saw nothing but her miserable, weak husband, and his family of half-caste children. What could she say or do? how deal with the situation? It was true, as this young fellow had declared, that hers was the stronger character, and before pronouncing judgment she resolved to see and hear the culprit.

Mallender for his part instinctively realised the many vital questions that were being debated in the mind of his rigidly motionless companion, and maintained a prudent silence.

At last, the car stopped at the great wooden gate, and before this could be unfastened, the postern opened quickly, and Mota flew out—a pretty vision, in her white lace frock, and streaming hair.

"Oh, Geff, Daddy——" then she paused, as her eyes met Mrs. Rochfort's basilisk gaze.

"Run in, Mota, run in, go to Mrs. Dixon. This lady has come from England, to see your father."

Almost before Mallender completed the sentence, the child had darted back to the house, and rushed into her father's den, gasping out:

"Oh, Dad, Dad, only think! a lady has come from England to see you!"

Major Rochfort with a violent gesture motioned the messenger to leave him. He looked so alarmingly unlike himself, so frowning, and forbidding, that for the first time in her life Mota felt a little cowed, and ran to her brothers for explanation, and consolation.

Sophy was bringing the sentence herself—so be it! The culprit rose unsteadily, as Mallender ushered in his wife—a figure of frozen dignity—closed the door, and subsequently fought off, and held at bay, the united curiosity of the family, and Mrs. Dixon.

For nearly an hour Mallender paced the moonlit compound, conferring with his thoughts. He seemed to be always entangled in other people's affairs, and yet never got to grips with his own. First, there was stranded Miss Sim; now, the unmasked Rochfort. Well, at any rate as far as lay in his power, he had played the game, and done his best for them both. He felt a little bitter on the subject of his Cousin Fred, who had taken no notice of his letters—although Fan had declared that his hot temper soon subsided. He had now been five long weeks at Panjeverram, surely this was ample time for the cooling of Freddy's wrath! Yes, but how could he know, that the embers of his cousin's anger were stoked and kept aflame by the beautiful Lena.

For a woman of a cold lymphatic temperament, she had been unusually roused—and what an escape was hers! Imagine marrying a boy fourteen years her junior, who was a pauper! In all his complaints, and grievances, she warmly sympathised with Colonel Fred; to her, he confided his disappointment, and eagerly accepted her flattering sympathy—for the topic of Geoffrey was one he never ventured to discuss with Fan or Nancy. Also, he was secretly vexed, that the boy having thrown off his leading-strings, had suffered no appropriate punishment!

A friend lately "up" from Madras, had remarked:

"By the way, I saw that young fellow, your cousin, one evening on the Marina in a fine new motor."

"Alone?" enquired his kinsman suspiciously.

"He had a man with him," rejoined the other with a laugh, "a good-looking chap. I don't seem to be able to place him. As for ladies, make your mind easy, —it's too hot below, for any of our fair angels."

Meanwhile a certain lady—no fair angel this—was making it uncommonly hot for Mallender's host. Ultimately, however, his abject misery, humility, and penitence, disarmed her! Hers was the tender, protecting, mother nature! and after all, what was Robert but a big, foolish, rather stupid boy! It was impossible to withstand his misery; to witness *this*, hurt her too acutely. Rob must be consoled,—and forgiven.

At the end of an hour's confession and conference, Major and Mrs. Rochfort reappeared,—both somewhat shattered by the recent interview. She however soon rallied, and as usual took the initiative.

Addressing the petrified Mrs. Dixon in a cool practical tone, she said:

"Mrs. Dixon, I think I had better tell you at once, that I am your master's wife."

Mrs. Dixon shrank back against the wall, and ejaculated:

"God bless me! an' didn't I think he was a widower!"

"No, and I must also explain, that he is Major *Rochfort*. I am Mrs. Rochfort. He took the name of Smith, out here—for—for—for family reasons——" and she swallowed some impediment in her throat.

"Now did he?" ejaculated Mrs. Dixon with open-mouthed surprise.

"Yes," replied the lady with a look of fierce decision—"He has been telling me, how invaluable you are; so upright, sensible, and trustworthy, and that you have been a mother to his motherless children."

Mrs. Dixon answered not a word, she was endeavouring to grasp several new ideas, and felt completely bewildered, and *bouleversée*.

"I want you to tell the children, that I am their stepmother from England, and that I should like to see them."

The two youths, with neatly brushed hair, were presently introduced—both a little shy; it was the first time they had ever seen a lady in their own house.

She was old, and not pretty, but had a pale, kind, face. Then Mota appeared, in her best evening frock, offering a beautiful contrasting picture to her dusky, but clever-looking brothers. At this enchanting vision, Mrs. Rochfort completely lost her head, and held out a pair of trembling hands; and the child, in answer to an irresistible summons in the lady's eager face, climbed into her lap, and kissed her. Thus, all these somewhat unexpected introductions were harmoniously accomplished.

Meanwhile Major Rochfort had drawn his guest aside, and said:

"She is a saint, Mallender, and you were right. Oh, *why* did I not speak ages ago! It would have saved me years of worry, misery, and anxiety; but I was a coward; I can face a stiff country, but an awkward situation. *No!* Sophy has forgiven me, I start to-day with a clean slate, and she is going to take the children."

"I say! that's splendid! She is a brick!"

"I think what melted Sophy, was a glimpse of Mota at the gate, but I may be wrong—and it was just her own goodness We have talked it all out! The boys stay here with Dixon, and continue their education, for the present. Later, they will be well launched. We intend to take Mota home, first going to the Hills. Sophy finds this heat killing, and wants to get off at once. I expect it will be a terrible rush. She's explained about the different names—that's a bit awkward of course,—but Dixon is a good unsuspicious soul, and will make no trouble."

"Daddy, supper is ready," a clear young voice called out, and Mota entered hand in hand with Mrs. Rochfort. "Is the new lady to stay?—*may* she?"

Rochfort glanced at his wife, and she promptly answered:

"Yes—I should like to, Rob, but Mota must take me to wash my hands, and make myself tidy." Exit Mota, with an air of importance, solemnly leading the new lady to her own apartment, the nursery.

The supper was cold, and excellent; if "the new lady" ate little, she absorbed a good deal. The homely comfort, the good plain food (and Robert always so difficult to please, and so fastidious at home!), the bright young people, with their complete absence of self-consciousness. They carried on most of the conversation, chiefly about tennis, photographs, and the demise of the dhoby's cow. Mota offered the guest a mango, not merely off her own tree, but her own plate! Pedro gave her a vivid description of the latest college cricket match, where he had made four runs! Mallender gravely considered the little party, and the chief guest. The children were doing their utmost to entertain Daddy's friend from England—the plain middle-aged childless woman, who discoursed with painful effort, on prickly heat, punkahs, and the miseries of a journey by rail, with the thermometer at 99.

The Major was evidently upset, his nerves were on wires; he sipped an iced peg, and talked spasmodically, but was as a rule silent, and unquestionably ill at ease. Mrs. Dixon found herself still bewildered. She was not accustomed to sit at the same table with soft-voiced, distinguished ladies, who wore diamond rings, and pearls the size of peas; moreover she felt instinctively, that this unexpected visitor was the forerunner of a break-up!

Mallender had been a guest at many suppers; suppers gay, and suppers grave, but never at one that for electrical atmosphere, awkwardness, or dramatic possibilities, approached the present meal!

He observed the long stealthy glances, cast by Mrs. Rochfort, at a large coloured photograph which hung exactly opposite to her seat; the portrait of a lovely young woman, dressed in the fashion of ten years previously—the face was so vivid, and so radiantly happy, that it seemed impossible to think of the original, as lying under a flat gravestone, in Panjeverram cemetery. It was a picture of Maddelena de Rosa, the mother of the three lively children who sat at table with Sophy Rochfort and her faithless husband.

Mota—who for her age, was preternaturally sharp—had intercepted the new lady's furtive glances, and exclaimed:

"Oh—I see you are looking at the picture; it is our pretty mother; she is dead this long, long, time, before I was born"—the Major shifted uneasily in his chair, and was about to interpose, but the child chattered on in her shrill piping treble, "An old woman comes here sometimes. The ayah knows her, she is her friend, and she gives ayah money, she says, she is our *great*-grand-mother, and brings flowers, and lays them before the picture, and cries and moans, and cracks her fingers over my head; she is *very* black—and——"

At this moment, Mallender with a jerk of his elbow, knocked over his tumbler and wine-glasses; the subsequent commotion, and his voluble apologies, changed the topic—and possibly saved his host from an apoplectic seizure! Immediately after this exploit, the gallant guest (determined to give no further opening for Mota's disclosures) embarked on a series of animated questions, respecting Mrs. Rochfort's celebrated "Poms"; their prizes, weight, age, and the various shows at which they had been triumphantly exhibited; his assumed enthusiasm and Mrs. Rochfort's explanations, carried them on safely, till the end of the meal.

Immediately after supper, the master of the household motored his wife back to the Madras hotel, and when he returned in the middle of the night, he found his guest still awaiting him.

"Well—it's all settled!" he began at once, "and I've to thank *you*. If I'd followed my own instinct, I believe I'd have thrown up the sponge and cut and run, to Australia. We propose to stay in the Hills till September, and then go home. Sophy is crazy about Mota, and intends to pass her off as the orphan of a very dear friend, no one would ever suspect the child of anything but pure English blood."

That was true, thought Mallender, but her children?—what of them? They might resemble her brothers,

or her grandmother! However, naturally he made no remark. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.

"And what about you?" resumed Rochfort. "I must settle about you."

"Oh, I'll be all right, don't bother about me! I'll go into Madras, and wait upon events."

"Not you, in this sweltering heat! it's bad enough here, but the walls are thick, and the old house is cool. You make this your home, as long as ever you like; stay with Dixon and the boys, and use the car, and horses. Do you realise all you have accomplished for Sophy, and me?"

"Oh, no—that was her doing!"

"But she says not; says *you influenced her!* and I believe Sophy; Mallender, you have been a trump! What's the good of your mock modesty and playing the ostrich——? Well, I understand that Francis is full of grand schemes he and your fellow have hatched out between them, and I expect they will put you on to something, before long."

"All right, I'll remain here for a little, as my head-quarters, if I may, but you must let me pay my bazaar, and consider myself a P.G."

"Do you want to *insult* me?" cried Rochfort angrily.

"Nonsense, you know I don't, but——"

"Then say no more about it—that's my last word!"

To this injunction Mallender tamely agreed; but he secretly resolved, after his host had departed, to come to a financial understanding with "the Miss."

CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Rochfort, a clever and practical woman, promptly took matters into her own hands; sent Parsons home—lest peradventure she might learn too much—and then, with her husband and adopted daughter, started for Ootacamund. Within a short time, Mallender also departed on an active, "personally conducted" search. He was anxious to make up for four weeks', nay four

months' idleness; instigated by information from Francis, he put his shoulder stoutly to the wheel, and set out for Vellore, where he believed he had a clue, and pursued and ran to earth an elderly man, who proved to be merely a bankrupt horse-dealer. From Vellore, it was but a short journey to Bangalore, from Bangalore, he followed various wills-o'-the-wisp, to Mysore, Mercara, and Trichinopoly.

Delicacy forbids one to linger on the intrusions into family affairs effected by Mallender; the skeletons he dragged from their cupboards, the black sheep he disturbed; the fugitives hiding from their creditors, "or their wives." Over these unpleasant successes, it is permitted to draw a veil. Failure merely roused him to still more active exertions; week after week passed and still Mallender prosecuted the quest, with unabated zeal; by rail or tonga, bullock-cart, or on horseback, accompanied by the camera, and Anthony—his ever sympathetic adviser, adjutant, and confidant—he travelled wide and far.

September found him once more in Panjeverram, foiled, but still hopeful. The wayfarer's face was haggard, and weather-beaten, he had experienced several "go's" of fever, his clothes were considerably the worse for wear, his smart appearance had become eclipsed by sun, dust, privation, and anxiety. After a couple of days' rest at Panjeverram, he presented himself at Shumilal's office, and was received by the principal with upraised hands, and greeted as a long-lost friend!

"The very young gentleman we wanted, where have you been?" enquired Shumilal, eyeing him critically, and noting his altered looks.

"Only doing a little on my own, up in Mysore, and Coorg."

"No results?"

"None so far,—but I've discovered a lot of things, that might be useful to other people."

"Ah, no doubt," agreed Shumilal with a look of grim

amusement. Then leaning forward confidentially, "I think we have got him—at last!"

"Um, yes—I'll believe it, when I see him."

"You shall see him this time, I guarantee," declared the other with dignified confidence. "I will send your plan of action to Panjeverram, where you are staying at present."

"But why not give it to me now?"

"Oh, there are wheels within wheels," replied the other nodding his head, and looking wise, and inscrutable.

"Precious slow ones!" exclaimed the visitor. "Well, mind I shall expect to hear from you, in not later than a week!"

"I promise for a fortnight, on my honour," said Shumilal; he rose as he spoke, and bowed his client out of the room, and down the stairs. Apparently his time was invaluable. Was his honour of the same quality?

Although to Mallender, Madras had once seemed to be the city of friends, he now felt lonely, and depressed, as he walked slowly along Pophams Broadway. The regiment he had known had been moved up country, and replaced by another from Singapore. He avoided the Club, and the polo ground—in a month the Hill people would descend in force. Somehow he experienced an instinctive reluctance in presenting himself in a circle, where once he had been welcomed with open arms, as a relative of the Tallboys—since the Tallboys had now cast him off! Fortunately he had no idea of, or any means of hearing, the whispers respecting him that Mrs. Fiske poured into the ears of her confidantes. To these, her information would be imparted after this fashion:

"*I* always thought there was something fishy about young Mallender; his sudden arrival was rather queer to start with, and I know for a fact, he had an intrigue with that wretched Ada Sim, and *paid* to get her out of the country! I heard this from Mrs. Wylie, whose husband was Mallender's confidant; and then he got into another mysterious scrape, which must have been

pretty *bad*, as the Tallboys turned him out of their hotel the very day they arrived in Coonoor. A friend of mine met him flying for the train with all his baggage, and his two servants, and Nancy Brander chasing him like a mad woman! I'm told he has been seen knocking about Madras, looking dreadfully seedy and shabby—serves him right. *I* took his measure. *I* knew he was an upstart, and impostor, sponging on the Tallboys!"

Luckily Mallender did not hear this version of his character; but he had an intuition that there was something hostile in the social air, and held himself in solitude, and retirement.

The rainy season still continued, though the violence of the monsoon had abated; everything in the shape of vegetation was now so refreshed and resuscitated, that one might almost imagine they could see the plants sprouting, hear the sap running, and the leaves unfolding in the tropical surroundings of Panjeverram. The great banyans had renewed their youth; ferns, arums, bamboos, plantains, glistened and dripped and grew; the sun-baked yellow plains were now a vivid green, dotted with lean appreciative herds, yet the actual atmosphere of the place was steamy, and enervating. Flying ants, snakes, and other crawling objects, were all, in their several ways, obtrusively active,—and the land brought forth frogs!

As the two Smith boys were at college, and only came home for week-ends, Mallender, and Mrs. Dixon, had the house more or less to themselves. In the mornings, he exercised the horses, or waded after teal and snipe in the marshy land that lay within a couple of miles to the west; after dinner, he and Mrs. Dixon foregathered in the den; she sewed and mended, whilst he smoked, or read. Occasionally he read aloud interesting local events, or what his companion specially enjoyed—accidents and tragedies. She was a fluent talker, and thus this couple so curiously thrown together, wiled away the moist sultry evenings.

Mallender rather enjoyed listening to Mrs. Dixon's long-drawn tales; they diverted a somewhat embittered mind from its own affairs. He learnt, that she had married at sixteen a sergeant in her father's regiment, "the Roifles," and gone home with him to the depôt then. There he had ill-treated her, led her a miserable life, and ultimately drank himself to death. Subsequently—and as is so usual in similar cases—she had again become the wife of a sergeant, and once more a sergeant in "the Roifles," a good man, who had made her very happy; but they had buried all their children; one in Bellary and three in Kamptee. Then her husband fell ill, and was sent to Madras Hospital, to be under special doctors,—and there he died, leaving her all his savings. Soon after she became a widow, every single penny was lost in the failure of a House or Bank, and she was almost destitute; the regiment was good to her, but of course she had to turn to and work, so she put a humble-like advertisement in the paper, and Major Smith engaged her at once; it was a few weeks after Mrs. Smith died, and Mota was an infant.

"Oh, and hadn't I work to rear her!" she exclaimed, "among these divils of milkmen—such milk for a baby, just blue with water. I had the cow milked afore me, so there could be no deceit, and still and all, her milk was like skim; one day I came round the corner unexpected, and there was the chap, after me seeing him milk, and him going to the butler with the can—hadn't he the great turban off his head—yards of it—soaking and heavy with water, and wasn't he squeezing it into the milk for the dear life? See now, ye never could be up to them blacks! After that, we had our fine Nellore cow, and I milked her with my own two hands, till the child had cut her teeth."

"I believe you have been here nearly nine years," said Mallender.

"I have so, and it's me own fault, that I'm not married out of it. Some of the fellows suspicion I have big savings—but I'll not stir a toe out of the house till I'm

no longer wanted, and at fifty-five year of age, if I were to marry again, I'd be a nice old fool! Anyway, my savings is for the boys."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Dixon."

"Ye see, I'm fond of them, especially Pedro; there's a real gentleman for ye, and so loving; if you was to put your eyes on sticks, that fellow could not tell a lie! I'm wishful, I had some eddication for the children's sakes; I can talk Tamil and Telagu, but I only went to the regimental school, and was never to say smart. Sewing and housekeeping, and keeping order and decency, is just all I'm good for."

"I think it's pretty well," observed her companion.

"I taught Mota her reading, writing and sewing, but latterly we had a young woman from Madras three days a week, with a high character as governess; she was just a streel of a young thing, and found the child mighty wild, and could make no hand of her, unless I sat with them at the lessons. Mota is terribly imparious for a little girl of nine, and that has never seen no company. Now and then, we do go in to Madras for shopping, and to the band, and every couple of Sundays, we make out church at Monaghary, but the Major he won't have no visitors whatever; not even children, much less the parson. Faix, it's a queer sort of life, is not it?" and she looked across at her companion for confirmation; but he suffered the pause to lapse without comment. "Well," she added—drawing a long sigh, "every cripple has his own way of walking!—and it's not for the likes of *me*, to interfere."

Mallender nodded, then he said: "Of course not—it's a—personal affair."

"'Tis so," she agreed, "and the Major made a bargain wid me the day I engaged, and a bargain is a bargain! and so though it goes to me heart, I keep a shut door, and a closed mouth. Anyhow Society don't trouble Panjeverram; it's the leavings of everywhere; just an overgrown, forgotten old place, and cram full of snakes, and ghosts."

"Ghosts! Surely you don't believe in that sort of rot, Mrs. Dixon?"

"Do you, sir?"

"Certainly not, though they say I have a ghost of my own at home."

"Then Captain Mallender, dear, if it's the last word I'll spake—*I've seen one!*"

"You don't mean that," and he laughed incredulously, "let me hear all about it!"

"Well now, I declare, it's the pure truth I'm going to tell ye," said Mrs. Dixon laying down her work, "when I was a girlie of about fifteen, the Roifles was lying in Madras Fort, and my father was a Quarter-master-Sergeant. Our quarters were fine and big, and near the North Gate; somehow or other, I never felt very easy in our living room; for people—that is the blacks—give out it was haunted by a woman who had hanged herself from the punkah, years and years before."

"Did she? What a foolish thing to do."

"That's as it may be, we don't know the ins and outs! Well, one morning very early, I got up for a drink of water, and as I went past the room, by the verandah, it had a strange sort of appearance, and as far as I could make out, in the dim light,—there was *someone* in it. And by me faith there was! I thought my heart would lepp out of me mouth, when I saw a woman hanging from the punkah, which was moving slowly backwards and forwards, and backwards and forwards. Her head was all to one side, lying on her shoulder, her arms hung down stiff like, and her dress was going with a sort of 'swish, swish,' that would make your skin creep. For a while, I stood there just paralysed, and then I screeched to me father and mother; and bedad, and I'll tell ye no lie, they saw her too. With the first squint of dawn she faded away, and there was nothing whatever there, but the barrack furniture, and the great heavy old punkah! I tell ye we moved off pretty smartly, though they were fine airy rooms, and I'll lay me life she is hanging there in Sergeants' Quarters A Block to this day."

"No, no, Mrs. Dixon," said her companion, "that *would* be hard lines on the poor creature! It was just a joke, that someone played on you."

"Is it a joke?" she repeated shrilly. "Didn't I see her face, and by my faith, I'll never forget it.—I see you don't believe; there does be people that cannot see shapes, and lucky for them! There is something here too," she added triumphantly.

"What, in this house?" said Mallender, sitting erect.

"So the servants say. I've not come across it, but there does be strange stories about bad folk, that lived in the bungalow long long ago. Whatever it is, it's in your room."

"Oh, I don't mind, as long as it's not a cobra. I'd like to meet a ghost, and question it!"

"Now, Captain Mallender dear, *don't* talk that way," she urged, once more laying down her work, and surveying him gravely—"it brings ill luck; ill luck, and no mistake."

"Can't bring me much more than I've had!" he answered bitterly.

"Oh, hould yer tongue for goodness' sake!" she protested with a scared expression; then after a short silence, added:

"I heard from the Major to-day, they will soon be moving. He says Mota is looking splendid, and making a terrible stir at children's parties, and Mrs. Rochfort wrapped up in her, as if she was a thousand times her own. I can't rightly get my tongue round *Rochfort*, him living here so long as Major Smith—it's a bit confusing, but I expect he was ashamed of his first marriage, and kep' it a secret." She looked interrogatively at Mallender, who merely nodded his head; *he* was not going to let Rochfort down.

"He says, he is writing to you to-morrow, and so is Mota, and now Captain," rising and folding up her mending, "there is ten o'clock striking, and I'll wish you good luck and a good night," and she went away.

But Mallender did not move for another hour, he was reading Orme's "History of India," and deeply inter-

ested. The night was warm and muggy after rain; the moon shone fitfully above the black banyan trees, as he lay with his door to the verandah wide open, listening to the night's mysterious sounds; the uncertain dripping from the mango trees, the chaunting of frogs, and the far, far-away cry of a jackal. For a long time he remained awake, worried by his own conflicting thoughts. Finally he decided, that if his next venture failed, he must abandon his search,—driven to the extremity by a process of exhaustion. He would wait till after Christmas, in order to put in a full twelve months, and then go home,—defeated. He had his house to see to, a home, which for all he knew to the contrary, he held on sufferance. He must find some employment, that would bring him in two or three hundred a year. Oh, if he was only still in the service! —yes, but how to live on his pay? and the problematical rent of Mallender!

At last sleep claimed him. He seemed to have slept for a long time, but it was really not more than a couple of hours, when he suddenly awoke with the conviction that there was someone creeping stealthily about the room. His heart gave a violent lurch—was this the ghost, come to answer his challenge?

Whatever it was, it was disagreeably near, for he could distinctly hear its hurried breathing.

"Who's there?—what do you want?" he demanded in a sharp "on parade" tone of voice. No answer, so he hastily put out his hand to reach the matches, overset a small lamp, and was immediately rewarded by an atrocious odour of kerosene oil. Helpless, he stared steadily into the gloom; the moon had sunk, and the room was dark as pitch. Gradually by degrees, he discerned, that the outline of the door, was a shade lighter, and it seemed to him, as he gazed, that a shadow flitted through and melted away into the surrounding gloom. He had no light, and no slippers—otherwise, he would have risked the fatal chance of a cobra under foot, and pursued the intruder.

As he sat erect, staring hard, a faint glimmer of dawn became apparent ; and at this moment, a cock crew ! —evidently a young and inexperienced bird, whose note was weak and discordant.

"So it *was* the ghost ! " muttered Mallender. "He might have given me a tip," and he threw himself back on the pillows, and was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

WITHIN a fortnight, the promised information arrived by special coolie. On this occasion, Mallender's destination was one hundred and fifty miles from Madras, and described as Wellunga, an old cantonment, twice decimated by cholera, and long abandoned. "Here," announced the letter, "you will meet your Uncle, who now goes by the name of Beamish, and is a benevolent gentleman, of wealth and caprice."

Two days later, found the adventurer and his suite once more *en route.* The first eighty miles of the journey were accomplished by rail, the latter part by dâk, in a tonga behind lean and ill-tempered ponies, who were changed amid sensational scenes every ten miles. This was by no means a comfortable expedition, but Mallender's resources were nearly exhausted, and he was obliged to study economy. Researches in Mysore, Coorg, and Travancore,—though planned with the most rigid prudence,—had proved unexpectedly expensive. Fascinated by the allurement of pursuit, Mallender had parted with his guns, and watch, and thanks to Anthony's exertions, obtained a fair price. This transaction had brought home to Anthony the painful fact that his master was short of money ; and he was now keener than ever in quest of his fortunes. Mallender had applied to his family lawyers in London questioning the stoppage of his income ; but their answer had not been satisfactory ; in formal terms, they reminded him that his father had agreed to certain stipulations, and by these he was bound to abide ; unless

he preferred to embark on a costly law-suit, and compel his Uncle to come forward, and establish his identity.

"We believe that he is alive," added the firm, "and if you continue to press, and harass him, he may possibly close on the park and house,—which are legally his property. The outlay on repairs, which is to be met by your mother's fortune, is, as we advised at the time, a serious and costly mistake. The alterations proceed very slowly, and it will be six months before the workmen are out.

"We remain, dear Sir,
"Yours faithfully,
"SCRIVEN, SWAN AND CO."

This letter was in his pocket, its contents in his head, as Mallender in a crazy old tonga was being jolted over a country, hopelessly empty, monotonous and level. Late in the afternoon as he approached Wellunga, gradually there came into view the gaunt outline of ruined barracks and bungalows, thrown into sharp relief by a splendid sunset. The general effect was such a flaming blaze of red and gold, that it looked as if molten fire were endeavouring to burn up the river, and a great straggling bazaar, which lay between the cantonment and the water—probably the cause of the cholera, which had twice emptied the station.

The whole place was set in sterile surroundings of brick-coloured soil, rocks, and scrubby jungle, presenting a depressing appearance of forlornness and solitude.

Approaching their journey's end, the wayfarers were rattled past the remains of a once imposing, but now roofless mess-house; the bare rafters of its verandahs stuck out on all sides like rows of grinning teeth. Near by, stood at intervals, various dilapidated dwellings surrounded by jungle, from which emerged here and there, a sturdy mango, a pomegranate tree, or even a half-strangled acacia,—the hardy survivors of a garden. One of these old bungalows, rescued from the hand of Time, proved to be the official Rest House, here the

tonga and its smoking ponies came to a halt, and the stranger was welcomed by a cheery old man, wearing a clean white turban and a faded red tunic,—once the property of some regimental officer.

His reception was so effusive, that it was evident guests were an agreeable novelty. The venerable butler bustled about, and presently the new arrival was experiencing the benefits of a hot bath, and an appetising meal.

Subsequently, when he strolled into the little verandah to smoke, he found that the moon had risen, and by its cold white light he surveyed Wellunga; noticed the solid masonry of the dead cantonment, its air of utter isolation and desolation, made still more evident by the pitiless full-faced moon. The young man was impressed by the remarkable coincidence that once more his search had brought him amidst ruins, and solitude; but naturally people who abandon the world, take refuge in the waste places of the earth.

"No one living here?" he enquired, addressing the hovering attendant,—who had been a sepoy of the 15th Madras Native Infantry, and was inclined to be communicative.

"No, saar, only some half-castes, and road officials. Once long ago, this plenty big place, many soldiers in barrack, then cholera coming, and all the houses empty, and tumble-down. One officer only here still."

"Who is he?"

"General Beamish, saar, very old, living in General's quarters."

"Been here long?"

"Twenty-four years, never going away, never seeing friends, twice every day, drive same road, same time."

Mallender's heart sank. If Rochfort was too young, here was possibly the other extreme! but remembering Rochfort's opinion, he clung to hope. A native's idea of age was so vague; he would wait, and judge for himself.

The next morning, as he sat at *chotah-hazri*, attended by the assiduous butler, he questioned him further.

"This bungalow of yours is newly whitewashed and

well kept, you have spoons, and good crockery. How is this—when I see that the last entry in your book of guests was five years ago ? "

" It is the General's orders," was the prompt reply. " He likes any gentlemans stopping here, to be all right ; therefore I getting spoons and sheets from his house, and sending over for your honour's dinner. Behold, he passes now ! "

A large landau drawn by a pair of fine walers, came slowly into view ; it was driven by a magnificent coachman, and preceded by running syces, waving silver-mounted yâk tails, or chowries. Propped high in the carriage, sat an aged bent man, with a long white beard. Beside him, was a stout elderly woman, her round, good-natured face half hidden by a hideous mushroom topee.

" It is his Honour the General, and Mrs. General Beamish," explained the butler. The announcement was the knell of Mallender's hopes. That venerable and decrepit figure was at least eighty years of age. Here was another failure ! He had no luck, of what use to go on ? He felt hopeless and despondent ; in spite of all his effort and outlay, it seemed as if some tremendous, but fantastic force, was striving against him ; luring him to out-of-the-way places, there to abandon him in perplexity and disappointment ; and for the first time since he had begun his search, he was pricked by a suspicion of being purposely led astray ! But before taking steps for immediate departure, he decided to have a look round the strangest environment in which he had yet found himself, and seizing his topee and stick,—in case of snakes,—he set out to explore.

As he gazed about dispiritedly, he distinguished the parade ground, the old horse lines, and a vast walled enclosure, which proved to be the cemetery. Is anything in the world more forsaken and forgotten, than an up-country burial-place in India, where rest unremembered and unknown, the unconscious builders of Empire ? Here, the explorer aimlessly wandered, among flat gravestones, huge tombs of various forms, and

sizes, pyramidal, bomb-shaped, or square, all of either stucco or red sandstone, and all gradually crumbling in the fierce tropical sun. Mallender was impressed by two facts; the dimensions of this well-peopled enclosure, in comparison to the size of the cantonment, and the perfect order in which it was maintained. The walks were weedless, the inscriptions legible and undefaced. Who, in this dead station, undertook "*Le culte des morts?*"

Another remarkable fact was the *youth* of the departed! Scarcely one of these had seen thirty years. Many headstones bore no names; but a gigantic red tomb, recorded the intelligence that seventy-eight of the men, and non-commissioned officers of the Green Dragon Regiment, who died of cholera, were there interred.

The stranger paused, arrested by his own name, and read on a slab:

"Sacred to the memory of Geoffrey Hailes, of the 30th Regt. M.N.S. wantonly shot by a Sepoy of his company on the 5th Dec. 1831 aged twenty-seven years."

Near by lay "the mortal remains of Alidora Pegler, who died August the 9th 1785, aged twenty-one years." Underneath was this quaint information, "She was a young woman of most engaging manners."

Not far from Alidora, was the grave of "Dorothea Sumers, a dutiful daughter, a loving wife, and a happy mother, but departed this life, one day after the birth of her son, May 22nd 1796, aged nineteen years." The poor girl had not been granted much time to realise the happiness of motherhood.

From this grave, Mallender passed to that of "Richard Horsley of the Honourable Company's Service, cut off on the night of June 4th 1772, by the hand of an unknown assassin, aged twenty-three years."

Next, was a tall stone erected to the memory of six young officers "who were suddenly swept into eternity, by the plague of cholera."

An imposing obelisk, which towered over all the tombs, bore the name of:

"Mrs. Charlotte Travers, whose soul, perfect in all

earthly ordained virtue, departed at the call of its guardian Author, for its next assigned function in the Eternal Kingdom."

Not far from this paragon, was a modest slab recording the fact, that "the officer who lay beneath it, was killed most suddenly in a duel on Christmas day 1802."

The spirit of the environment had taken hold of Mallender, and the oppressive silence, save for the twittering of a sparrow, the rustle of a lizard, weighed heavily upon his consciousness. Year after year a pitiless Eastern sun beat down on this forlorn enclosure, and it seemed to Mallender as if these dead folk,—his countrymen and women,—appealed to him from their graves, to at *least* read their names, and the manner of their deaths. With a mind attuned to this melancholy inspection, he was turning the corner of a colossal tomb, when he all but collided with a girl carrying a large wreath! At a glance, he noticed that she was young and slim. He also received an impression that she was handsome.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered in his bewilderment.

She stared blankly at him for a moment, and then exclaimed, "Oh, oh—it's all right," and stepping back, motioned him to proceed. From a little distance, a male voice bellowed:

"Come on, come on, Tara—what the dickens is keeping you?" and he presently heard the swish of skirts, and light footsteps running away.

Now that "Tara" had departed, Mallender retraced his way, consumed with curiosity to know, where she had deposited the wreath? He discovered it on a flat stone, which bore the name,

"Robert Gordon, Surgeon. He was good to all. He died of Cholera July 1st 1839."

Over seventy years had elapsed, and this man was *still* remembered! Wellunga was undoubtedly an outlandish, other world place!

As Mallender left the cemetery, he noticed the girl,

and a square-shouldered young man, walking rapidly away in the direction of the native town.

Returning to the Dâk Bungalow, the guest found a good solid breakfast awaiting him: Dâl curry, eggs, home-made bread, fresh butter, coffee, and fruit. So in spite of himself, he still sponged!

"I suppose all this comes from the big house?" he enquired addressing the butler,—a despotic old person. who for some unexplained reason, would not suffer Anthony to wait, and had set Chinna-Sawmy to wash the kitchen dish-cloths!

"Yes, saar, that is the order—everything in Wellunga is as the General commands; this bungalow is kept ready and in good repair; the old places of course are ruins—but no one may touch one bit of wood, or one brick—though many wanting them for house, and cattle sheds; and plenty good dhoby stones, and curry stones, in *cemetery*—but once he goes—*all* goes!"

"Including yourself?"

"Yes, your honour, I also depart to my own country—Quilon."

"I saw a young lady to-day, and a young man, who are they?"

"Miss Tara and Mr. Tom, the General's son and daughter."

Mallender put down his fork, and stared at the speaker in genuine surprise.

"Oh, yes. Miss Jessie, she is older; the General married two times, first family all gone Europe—he never going, too much liking this country, his people calling him always—all no use. His wife die, then he marry one English woman, not proper family; but taking great care of old man. He still getting big pension," he added with a significance that was entirely wasted on his listener. "The General, has all he wants; now he sits hours in big verandah looking at India, and always thinking, thinking, then he go for drive, then put to bed, same like child. He has his senses, he can walk, and see, only too old, and a little deaf."

"Why does he live at Wellunga?"

"That I cannot surely tell; but when young officer he was here with regiment. I have seen him get out of carriage at Mess House, and go in, and sit there, long, long, time. When he come out, he look shaking and plenty sorry, because all, all gone, everyone—and he only is left."

"And do his family remain always, in this dead place?"

"Oh, no, Master Tom has fine big coffee estate on Hills, and the Missies go there, when here it is too hot. The General is very rich, he shut eyes to Europe family—only liking Indian family."

"Perhaps he has forgotten the others?" suggested Mallender.

"Oh, no, memory good, not to-day, but for long ago; nothing he do not know, nothing he cannot tell, he got plenty medals and plenty fighting. The old gentleman keeps fine horses, and many syces and peons, same like as if *real* General, and station full; but inside bungalow, is as the Missus pleases, and no show, no spending. Counting eggs, and gram, and charcoal, same like sergeant's wife!"

"Well, I believe I shall be leaving you to-morrow," said the visitor. "I suppose I can get hold of some sort of tonga in the bazaar. Tell my boy to bring my writing things."

When Anthony had placed these on the table, he coughed significantly, and said:

"*This* place no use for master, and master soon, soon going,—but first must see the General. He is old, and knows much."

"Yes, but the General does not receive visitors," objected his employer, "and I cannot thrust myself upon him."

"That *I* will arrange," replied Anthony with colossal assurance, then before Mallender could fitly reply, and rebuke, he had turned on his bare brown heel, and effected a swift departure.

CHAPTER XXII

Although Mallender sat with his writing case open before him, his eyes wandered over the wide prospect commanded by the bungalow. What a picture of tragic solitude! In the foreground a mass of overgrown ruins, beyond these, the sun-baked plain, with its harsh orange soil, and far-away range of dim blue hills,—the whole a scene of ardent melancholy. His thoughts now turned to his own affairs, and his reflections were gloomy; he realised that his impulsive desire for results, had driven him to waste time and energies in hopeless directions,—of which the present situation was a specimen! Why, why, had fate singled him out for this adventure? He was not one inch "forrader" than months ago when full of high hopes he had embarked in Tilbury Docks. Well, he must pull himself together, decide upon a plan of action, and get out of this God-forsaken place as soon as possible: drawing the paper towards him, he began to write. Just at this moment, a visitor appeared between the stone piers of entrance to the little compound; a sturdy broad-shouldered man of thirty, dressed in kharki. He had a pleasant clean-shaven face, a square chin, and resolute jaw; as he took off his topee, he displayed a crop of thick brown hair, cut "*en brosse.*"

"I say," he began rather awkwardly, "you'll excuse me I hope, but my father, General Beamish, heard of your arrival—of course everything is known in this place," and he grinned, "and that you were a British officer; so he sent me over to ask if you would be so good as to call and see him?"

"I shall be delighted," declared Mallender, in his clear, high-bred voice, "but I must not go under false pretences, I'm no longer in the service."

"That does not matter a button—you've been in it, and the old man craves for a talk with one of his own profession. Although he is ninety-five, he is still drawing the pension of a Major-General. I expect the authorities are pretty sick! Eh?"

"Won't you sit down?" said Mallender, bringing forward a chair. "No doubt your father has seen a lot of service?"

"Oh, yes, volunteered for every campaign or scrap, that was going in his day. He is feeble on his pins, and a bit deaf, but his mind is as clear as ever. He likes to talk of old times, when he is in the humour, and he loves anything to do with soldiers. He doesn't come across many soldier-men here, as you may suppose, and he is mad keen on seeing *you*."

"All right—when shall I go over?"

"About six, when he is rested after his drive, and my mother says, will you stay to supper?"

"Thank you, I shall be delighted."

"You'll find Wellunga a mighty weird sort of billet," resumed the visitor, "not much of a field for your camera. Your rum little *chokra* told me you were a photographer."

"Yes, and he is my understudy, and very smart. How do you put in time here?"

"I don't put in much, I'm a planter—I've an estate up in Mysore, and manage another; but I run down to see the family, and this is the slack season for coffee. My sisters come up for the hot weather, but the old folks never stir, a couple of salamanders!"

"If it's not an impertinent question, what induced your father to settle here?"

"Oh, lots of things; sentiment for one, and to get out of the reach of his Europe relations, for another. You see he was married before, and my half-brothers and sisters tormented him to go back to England. He loves India, it's in his very bones, and this was the first place he came to, after he landed in the country."

"It must be pretty deadly for your sisters."

"They don't mind. Jessie is mad about poultry and tennis, and Tara—she is much younger than we are—has her books, and her horse, and is the sort of girl that's happy anywhere. Well, I notice you are writing for the dâk, it goes out at twelve, so I'll take myself off. See you this evening?" and Tom Beamish rose, jammed his pith "mushroom" on his head, and lumbered forth.

Some time after the carriage had returned, Mallender went over to the General's quarters; a fine stone-built two-storeyed abode, and well-preserved specimen of its time. It stood in a spacious compound with two gateless entrances, which met in a sweep under a high-tiled porch; many comfortable-looking buff fowls were pecking and promenading round the premises,—which wore an air of solid ease and leisure. Two gorgeous peons with scarlet belts, brass badges and enormous turbans, were in waiting and salaamed profoundly. Having shouted the usual summons "Boy!" a brisk servant appeared, salaamed, and said, "Please to come this way," and led the visitor across a centre room into a wide verandah, commanding an extensive view of river, bazaar, and distant plain and hills. Here in a high-backed chair sat or hybernated, the venerable survivor of other days; a still fine-looking old man with the remnants of a magnificent physique; his noble head was now somewhat sunken on his shoulders; attached to his white drill coat, he wore the tarnished badge of his rank, and on his breast a row of war medals. General Richard Beamish did not look his age, not by ten years—his skin was wonderfully smooth, his blue eyes keen and bright; his limbs, however, were shrunken, and his bony hands displayed the dark knotted veins of age.

"I'm glad to see ye," he called out in a shaky and excited voice, a voice unexpectedly strong, "a stranger is a great event here—what's your name, young sir?"

"Geoffrey Mallender."

"God bless me! I knew a Geoffrey Mallender thirty

years ago, he was drowned—or something—there was a sort of mystery."

"He was my Uncle," announced the stranger, whose hopes were once more kindled.

"Mallender, this is my wife. Sally," he called to someone who had entered, "here is Captain Mallender; I knew his Uncle long ago."

The visitor turned and bowed, but Mrs. Beamish put out a large useful-looking hand, and gave him a motherly smile. "Motherly" was the adjective that best expressed Sarah Beamish! a woman of over fifty, with a pulpy corsetless figure, a kind sensible face, a little short nose, a pair of sympathetic eyes, a drab complexion. Her abundant brown hair was combed over her ears and gathered into a tight knot, she wore a stuff skirt, a loose white jacket fastened by a magnificent diamond brooch, and berlin wool slippers.

"You will take your supper with us," she said; her accent was common, but her face radiated benevolence. "It is the Beauforts' evening, but that's no matter; and you must come over to us whenever you find it dull. It is dull alone. Now I am going to leave you, to have a chat with the General." Then suddenly dropping her voice, "He was just crazy to see you,—let the old man talk, it's so good for him, and mind, he don't like to be interrupted."

"What's she saying? What's she saying?" demanded her husband, suspiciously. His eyes had been watching her moving lips.

"That she is leaving me to have a good old talk with you, sir," explained Mallender, as the purdah swung behind a solid form.

"A good woman, a good woman! My third wife, country born, country bred, no country blood—just an apothecary's daughter, and a trained nurse; but I did not marry her for *that*. No, no. Come now, young fellow, draw your chair nearer, for I want to question you about England, and the Army, and many other things."

"All right, sir, but I left the Army this time last year."

"And you could desert the colours, you a fine, strong young man?" and he considered his visitor with reproachful blue eyes.

"I had no choice, sir," replied Mallender. "I was terribly sorry to go. I hate being out of the Service."

"Aye, my lad, and when I hung up my sword after nearly fifty years, it broke my heart. I am very old, look at me. I'm ninety-five! I was born in the year of our Lord 1818, when people talked of Waterloo, and Bony was on St. Helena! When I first arrived, a 'Griffin' as they called us then, I met an officer who had known Clive—think of it! He told me, he seemed silent and morose, it was his last spell out here, and he was full of trouble and disappointment—the man who won India!"

"He put an end to himself, did he not?"

"Yes, in his house in Berkeley Square, with a penknife. I've seen great things in my day, but if I related them, people would say I was in my dotage, and I have no witnesses *now* to bear me out; I just sit here and look out over the plains that never change, and think of all the fine comrades I had, and their lives and deaths, and wonder if we will ever fall in together again? Well, I'll know before long—I may get the route any day! I'm just waiting for death."

Mallender hastened to turn the old man's mind to a more cheerful subject, and said:

"You must have seen a lot of service, sir?"

"Yes," and he touched his medals. "I put these on to do you honour. I only wear 'em Sundays, and Mrs. Beamish she got out her fine brooch. Here, you see, Moodkee—Aliwal—Rangoon—Pegu—and the Mutiny medals, I was all through that," he paused, and looked fixedly before him.

"Yes, I marched up to Delhi, with the first Madras Regiment, and I was in the first Brigade, under McNeil. McNeil was a hard man; hard on himself, as well as others; the forced marches were terrible; and in those days we wore shakos—no pith helmets then! At most

of our halts, we had a firing-party, and left a couple or more graves. I served at the Siege of Delhi—I saw Cawnpore, when one hundred and sixty-five women and children were in the well. I—Well, young man, for all our sakes, native and British, those times are best *forgotten*. Afterwards, I served in Afghanistan, and was recommended for the Cross, but the Brigadier knew I was hard up, and I took a sum of money, and sold my glory, to pay bazaar bills."

"But surely, sir, you have had good appointments?"

"Oh, yes, after a time I had fine billets; but I was always up to my neck in debt, and half my pay went to the soucars. I was like a man in a quicksand, the more I struggled, the deeper I went. Well, now I want to hear from one who has been on the spot, what is going on at head-quarters at home? Tell me about the Army—begad, it's only a handful,—this brand-new Army of the day. I read, and I'm read to, but I want to hear by word of mouth."

The old officer then proceeded to put his companion—who patiently submitted—to a severe, not to say drastic, examination on the subject of the new guns, new regulations, and drill; the uniform, soldiers' kit, the benefit, or otherwise, of Royal Commissions; particulars of the new signalling, and airships. He listened as to a fairy-tale, when Mallender described a field instrument that can tap, or interrupt a telegraph message—as well as telephone!

"Oh, if we'd had that in my time, we'd have done real wonders, miracles—sir, miracles!"

"Yes, and you had not a rifle warranted to kill at two miles, had you?" said Mallender.

"No, only good old brown Bess. And those motors and aeroplanes that I shall never see—no more than if I had lived in the Middle Ages!"

"You could easily see a motor, sir," replied his visitor, "but I'm not so sure of an aeroplane," and as he had made an ascent, he proceeded to relate his experience.

To this, the old man listened with hands on knees, parted lips, and an air of almost passionate attention.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as he leant back with a sigh of satisfaction, "at last I seem to understand the hang of the thing; you have put it before me, and I can almost imagine, that I'm sitting on a nasty cramped seat, rising steadily into the air, while all the world is falling away below me. Here is Mrs. Beamish coming to tell us that supper is waiting, and I've been keeping you. We are punctual folk—military time, sir! Come to-morrow, come to tiffin. Sally, my dear, this young fellow has done me no end of good; my mind is chock full of brand-new ideas." Then rising with tremulous difficulty, assisted by his wife, and a servant, the old veteran nodded his head, and tottered out of the verandah.

When Mallender was ushered into the dining-room, he was rather surprised to find the table almost surrounded, and supper already well started. Tom, who was apparently master of the ceremonies, jumped up and said, "Hello—here you are at last! the governor froze on to you. Captain Mallender, this is Tara, my youngest sister,"—the girl he had encountered in the cemetery —"and this is Jessie," indicating a thin plain young woman, with high cheek bones, and a bright pink blouse, actively engaged in carving a piece of cold beef. Jessie nodded, and beamed—she had her mother's smile. "Let me introduce Captain Beaufort," continued Tom waving his hand towards an enormously stout, bullet-headed man, with a massive red face, and heavy grey moustache. Captain Beaufort gave the visitor a martial look—rose, as it were at attention, shuffled his feet, and muttered a greeting.

"Miss Blanche and Miss Lily Beaufort," resumed Tom, glancing at two pretty tittering girls, with dusky complexions, elaborate white blouses, and coral necklaces and earrings.

"Now we are all acquainted, what will you have?" enquired Jessie. "Cold hump, curried fowl, or stuffed tomatoes?"

"Try the cold hump, Captain," urged Beaufort,—Beaufort was thoroughly, and aggressively, at home—"and this mango chutney is not to be sneezed at, I can tell you! and the beer is A1."

The board was spread with an ample repast, and decorated with vases of zinnias and marigolds. Miss Tara was officiating with an old French coffee-pot of the time of Louis XV., that would have brought tears of envy to the eyes of Fanny Tallboys. In fact, the appointments and surroundings were a curious and remarkable mixture; here, were rat-tailed spoons, Charles the First sugar bowls, superb candelabra, holding cheap candles (twelve to the pound), a coarse mission table-cloth, and bazaar crockery. The aristocratic side-board, and a book-case, were undoubtedly of the days of Count Lally, and seemed to shrivel up, and hold themselves aloof from the coarse "maistrey" furniture, and jail carpets,—their associates.

The company was also strangely assorted. The two Beaufort girls with the black tresses, and lovely liquid eyes, had unquestionably "four annas in the rupee." Their parent was a rough-hewn ranker. Mrs. Beamish, Jessie and Tom were a kindly common-place trio, of the lower middle class, and Tara, who did not bear even the faintest resemblance to her relations, was of a totally different type and race, evidently a "throw back" to some of the General's ancestors. She carried her slight figure with grace, her small stag-like head was set on a long neck, her little proud face was illuminated by a pair of dark granite-grey eyes; she had beautiful taper hands,—whilst those of Jessie looked as if her fingers had been cut off at the second joint.

"I think we met this morning," said the guest, addressing her, as she paused from her labours.

"Oh, yes, in the cemetery. I go there every other day to put flowers on the graves of Daddy's friends. At first, I thought *you* were one of them—one of the young men who had come back to look for something."

"You startled me too, I must confess. I understood Wellunga was entirely deserted."

"Not at all, Captain, not at all!" broke in Beaufort, speaking with his mouth full. "We are quite a nice little family party here; besides the General,—who is our Commander-in-Chief, and his good lady, and belongings; there is myself, and my girls, and my subordinate Perez. Then we have a Police Officer, who comes and goes, a very smart good sort of fellow."

"Indeed," exclaimed Mallender, who was evidently expected to say something.

"Oh, yes, and a Chaplain two or three times in the cold weather; I read the Service on Sunday, since the General resigned, and an inspecting Engineer, my boss, not much of a chap, in *my* humble opinion; all for new jims and ways and worrying his subordinates."

"Have you no doctor?" enquired the new-comer.

"No, but a first-rate native apothecary and dresser, —Dorosawny is as clever as they make them!"

"My mother is the doctor," put in Tom. "She's first-class, had a training in hospital, got diplomas, and all that sort of thing."

"What do you think of the place?" softly enquired Blanche, whose brown velvet eyes had never been removed from the stranger.

"He has not seen it yet!" rejoined Mrs. Beamish, who had just bustled in, found a seat, and was being pressed to partake of her own good things by Captain Beaufort, "and I'm afraid there is very little to see."

"I hear you take photographs," said Tara. "I do wish, you would do my horse Rustum, he is such a beauty."

"The General got him down from Bombay," announced Captain Beaufort, "a Damascus Arab, out of Abdul Rayman's stables. They wanted him for racing, and so I need not tell you his price was pretty *stiff!*"

"Tara is crazy about him," supplemented her sister. "As for me, I do not ride."

"Only your hobby, buff cochins!" put in her brother.

"Now do be quiet, Tom; you are too silly!"

" The General has a stable full of splendid animals," continued Beaufort, who evidently desired to impress the visitor. " He was a fine rider once, so was *I*," and he gave a laugh that shook not only his whole frame—but also the table. " Who'd think it ! "

" You come from Madras, I believe ? " murmured Blanche ; who was irresistibly fascinated by this stranger, who had dropped into their circle, as from the skies.

" Yes, I arrived yesterday evening."

" Everyone is still in the Hills," observed Tara. " I know Ooty well, I was at school there for seven years."

" Oo-ah, yes, and so accomplished," volunteered Blanche, with effusion. " Tara can do lovelee lace work, and play the piano, and sing—oh, soa beautifullee ! "

" There, that will do, Blanche," interrupted Tara, impatiently. To Mallender, " I'm not really accomplished, not like the girls at home."

" At home ! " echoed Blanche the irrepressible, " that, of course, is another thing, oh, my ! how I do long to go home ! "

" You'd hate it," declared the youngest Miss Beamish, with startling abruptness, and poor Blanche was once more chastened and crushed. Her father, who had finished an excellent and hearty meal, now broke in.

" You must see our great bazaar and native city, Captain, down by the river ; if the cantonment is dead, the bazaar is alive and kicking, that I can tell you ; it's chock full of money and rich natives. There is one chap called Rakar, who is rolling in rupees and gold mohurs. He has grand nautches—I've seen them," and he winked expressively, " the best girls from Travancore ; and he keeps fighting cocks, and fighting partridges, and all sorts of horses. One of them is a holy terror ; he got him from some big Rajah, a sort of processional brute, seventeen hands high, a splendid animal to look at, but a man eater, he has killed half a dozen—at least, so I'm told."

" The native city is tremendously old," broke in Tom, anxious to contribute information. " People give it

fifteen hundred years, it's said to be full of *loot*. I've seen some wonderful coins and jewels myself. It was right in the middle of lots of fighting, and grew rich on plunder—of course no Europeans live there."

"I can't say I'm surprised at that," remarked Mallender, dryly.

"But there were plenty here once," said Jessie. "Two or three regiments; first there was a mutiny, then cholera, after that the country became settled, and all the soldiers went away."

"I like Wellunga," announced Tara. "I was born here; but I must admit that it is an outlandish place."

"We have queer stories about the big battles around," added her brother. "There was a heap of fighting all over this country, and the natives say, it is full of hidden treasure—guarded by devils."

"Yes," agreed Beaufort, "there is the grave of an English officer about twenty miles out, with the date 1809; I've seen it. He is worshipped as a demon, and natives bring him brandy and cheroots."

"That is true," corroborated Tara. "I sometimes ride that way, but I think they only offer arrack, and bazaar tobacco *now*."

"And I can tell you something," added Blanche, with wide-open eyes (Blanche who was extremely superstitious). "It is said, that in some directions, at sun-down, or by moonlight, you can see great big camps, with men, and horses, and elephants, and standards, and hear shouts and bugles, and drums," and as she concluded, she gazed at Mallender, and shuddered affectedly.

"I've heard the drums!" was Tara's unexpected remark.

"Tara child, what nonsense you are telling," protested her mother, "you make me quite ashamed."

"No, no Mummy, no fear of that, you will never be ashamed of *me*," and she patted her arm affectionately. "Now shall we go into the next room and play bridge—we can have two tables to-night, no cut-throat!"

"Oh, all right, that will be so nice," agreed the Beaufort girls, in a breath, rising precipitately; but alas, their expectations were speedily extinguished.

"Let me see how we will play?" said Tara, looking about her. "Captain Mallender, Captain Beaufort, Jessie and I, and you two girls may have Tom and mother," and so it fell out! It was evident by many little signs and tokens, that the youngest Miss Beamish dominated the company, and was the lawgiver in her own household. They all seemed devoted to the girl, and so naïvely proud of her grace and beauty.

Two card tables were quickly arranged, and as they sat down and cut for partners, Tara announced:

"We play four annas a hundred, we used to play only for love—but love is *so* stupid!"

"Tar, I'm surprised at you! Is that your opinion?" shouted her brother, who had overheard this speech.

"Now, Tom," said she, blushing deeply, "do not mind us—please attend to your company, or—I will talk to you about Miss *M*."

This threat had the immediate effect of silencing Tom, who sat upon his hands,—a trick of his, and looked excessively sheepish and out of countenance.

Tara's command might well have been addressed to the Misses Beaufort, whose eyes were fixed on the young lady and her partner, with long looks of unrestrained interest, and low be it spoken—envy.

Bridge, at Wellunga, was played with impressive gravity, and not a little ignorance; here, there was no joking, no scolding, no glances of interrogative dismay. The only thing that upset the composure of the players was, when an enormous black, able-bodied insect, came booming in from outside, and endeavoured to dash itself against the candle shades.

"If my ayah were here," screamed Blanche, whose attention was almost entirely given to this quartette, "she would say that was the spirit of one who had lived in this bungalow long ago——"

"I'm glad to say your ayah is *not* here!" retorted

Tara, turning her head, and speaking with indignation, "*we* don't entertain the sweeper caste!" and poor Blanche was once more temporarily quenched.

At the end of an hour, Tara and Geoffrey rose, the losers of one rupee. The beautiful and imperious Tara was distinctly ruffled; she liked and always expected to be victorious, and first.

"Here, Jessie," she said to her sister, with a lofty air, "I give you the price of two fine fowls. Well, you must make the most of your gambling time, for when you are married to Samuel, you won't even *see* a card!"

"Tara, you wild girl!" protested Jessie, now a brick-dust colour, "how can you say such foolish things? You know, I shall go my own way, as to games."

"But it's true; your only cards will be collecting cards—you will see."

Mrs. Beamish now interposed her pleasant personality, saying:

"Tara, what a tease you are!" Then to Mallender, "She was always so, since she was a baby. She gets all her fun out of other people. Remember we expect you over to-morrow—as early as ever you please."

The party was breaking up, the Misses Beaufort and Tom were laughing and scuffling about their wraps, and eventually Mallender and Tom escorted the ladies home. This attention appeared to be a fixed custom—as was also the bi-weekly supper and bridge.

Mallender and Captain Beaufort paired off together, despite the bold manœuvres of the Captain's daughters, and indeed it was outrageously selfish of him, to appropriate the company of the interesting new-comer! Between Papa and Tara, these unfortunate damsels had no opportunities of improving their acquaintance with the handsome stranger.

As the two men walked ahead, Beaufort said, in a bluff off-hand way:

"Of course, I'm not a 'pucka' Captain; they just give me the rank here. I was a military man—now

I'm in civil employ. Since the old General has failed, *I* take things in hand a bit. What was your regiment ? "

" The Warlock Hussars."

" Oh, indeed," slightly abashed. " I never came across them. Well, if you are making any stay, I hope I and my girls will see a *lot* of you. A new face up here does us *all* good."

When they had arrived at their domain, once the Chaplain's Quarters, the Misses Beaufort—their father making a spacious background—overwhelmed the recent arrival with a loud and simultaneous invitation " to tea, pot luck—or tennis, whatever he pleased," to which he returned a polite, but indefinite reply. Such was the clamour and urgency of talk, that it was some time before he and Tom were able to effect their departure, and as they turned towards the Dâk Bungalow, Tom said :

" Those two are a topping good sort, and stand any amount of chaff. The most kind-hearted girls in India ; they can dance and play tennis, and make scrumptious native sweets and curries. Captain Beaufort has to do with the Roads, his wife is never on show, I fancy she is a bit too dark—these people get darker as they age. It's awfully rough on them, I must say ! "

" Have your sisters no other companions ? " enquired Mallender.

" Not in Wellunga, but lots in the Hills. I may as well tell you, they won't be here long. Jessie is engaged to a missionary in Tinnevelly, and Tara is going to marry a young planter—a friend of my own. As the baby of the family, she may strike a stranger as a little bit spoiled —but she's as good as gold, and as good as she looks."

" She is uncommonly handsome, if you do not mind my saying so."

" No, why shouldn't you ? Sometimes she carries on like a great lady, and has uncommonly high notions, I can tell you ! and where she *gets* them, beats me."

This remark brought them to the Dâk Bungalow, where a yawning Anthony awaited his master, and as his master took leave of Tom Beamish, he said :

"Can you help me to get a trap and ponies, that will take me back to the railway?"

"To be sure I can," he replied, "but not yet. You must stop with us for a little, and talk to the General; you brighten him up, and give him such pleasure,—and he has so little pleasure in life now, poor old boy. After a bit, I'll lay a dâk for you, and drive you the sixty miles myself—yes, and with the General's best horses. Come now, don't say no, see you to-morrow!" and before Mallender could argue or reply, he received a heavy thump on the back,—suggestive of ease and intimacy, and Tom Beamish was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

The following morning, as soon as General Beamish had returned from his drive, he despatched a messenger to summon his new acquaintance; who on this occasion was received in the drawing-room—a curious apartment! The walls coloured a sickly pink, were decorated with horns and heads, fine damascened arms, various spotty sporting prints, and many faded photographs in shabby Oxford frames. After a little desultory talk, the venerable officer fixing his steely blue eyes on the visitor, said:

"Young man, you gave me a deal of information yesterday, but begad, you never told me *what* has brought you to Wellunga?"

"Oh, that is too long a story, sir, and would only bore you to death."

"Bore away, and fire away! I really want to hear it!"

Mallender, who was now disinclined to disclose his mission, began the recital with obvious reluctance, and made it as brief as possible, whilst the old man, with a hand to his ear, listened eagerly to the outline of his many failures; when he concluded, he said:

"I remember meeting your Uncle in the Ooty Club, and hearing him say how he hated India! I suppose it has stuck in my gizzard, because I felt vexed—you see I always loved the country, and I can sympathise

with the old Mem Sahib, who hankered after ' the whiff of a huka, and the smell of a bazaar.' I took to the East from the moment I put a foot in it, and felt the sun on my back, and saw the palms, and the Arab horses —it was all Arabs in my time ! It's funny, how clearly I recall things of fifty years ago, yet cannot for the life of me tell you what happened last week," he concluded, with a hopeless sigh.

" Then you remember my Uncle's disappearance ? "

" Why, of course. I read all about it in the papers."

" Has it ever occurred to you that he might still be alive ? "

" Well, no—but after all, why not ? The fellow may have had his own reasons for hiding."

" What possible reason could he have ? He had heaps of money, and as you say, detested India ; why remain for thirty years hiding his identity in exile ? "

" Oh, for that matter," rejoined the General, and he gave a little cackling laugh, " I'm in exile, I'm hiding too,—and I've managed pretty cleverly ; I've another family in England. I'm hiding from *them !* "

Mallender murmured his assent.

" Yes, I suppose Tom has told you ! Well, now you have no idea of your Uncle's reasons for concealing himself, and you shall hear *mine,* I'll tell you my history, for you have an honest, upright look," and he stared into the tanned, high-bred face of his visitor.

" There are the cheroots, help yourself, and listen to me."

As Mallender selected a Trichy, he said to himself :

" This old gentleman much prefers talking about his own past, to discussing my present. How is it that people are always telling me their affairs, and mine get no forrader ? " and he resigned himself accordingly.

" I came out young," began the General, after clearing his throat. " I married young ; my Colonel's daughter, a girl of eighteen, but within a year she died of cholera. It nearly broke my heart. Think of it ! All I had, taken from me within twelve hours. As I had been out some

time, I took furlough, and went home, feeling as if I could never hold up my head again; but kind friends roused me, and made much of me, and by degrees I went out among people. After a bit I came across a very pretty,—I may say, amazingly beautiful girl, full of animation and gaiety. Her liveliness appealed to me, and raised my spirits; she was of old family, but hadn't a penny of fortune. Well, sir, we married, and came out here. Living was half what it is now—or less; eighty seers of gram to the rupee—think of that! I had good pay, and we set up in style with a carriage and pair, and gave dinners. My first home was on a modest scale, but admirably managed; here, there was no management at all! only dirty, idle, thievish servants, and enormous bills. However, my wife was always the belle of the station, and in extraordinary request for balls, theatricals, and picnics. Then came the children—three of them, hard on one another's heels, and Julia decided to take them home. I was not sorry to be rid of her! hoping to get a chance to economise, and save. Every month, I remitted money, but it was never enough; and my wife was so restless; if she was six months at home, she longed to come back to India, and if she came out—in six weeks' time she was dying for London! Sir," suddenly sitting erect, "her extravagance was incredible! I've known Julia to have three furnished houses on hand; if she tired of one, she took another; she had maids, and governesses, and a carriage; no doubt people supposed I was a very rich man, instead of a miserable poor devil, with little beside his pay. I tell you, my boy, I dreaded her letters and enclosures so much, that sometimes I've left them unopened for *days*—they took the heart out of me," and his old voice broke, and quavered.

"If this distresses you, sir, I beg you won't go on," urged his listener.

"No, no," he protested peevishly, "let me finish! Then came a grand smash, and Julia fled out here in order to escape her creditors. As I was responsible, I

had to borrow, and raise money at a ruinous interest, and settle most of her debts—but I was in the money-lenders' clutches for life. She returned home, cleared—whilst I was bound hand and foot; you see, part of my pay was sequestrated, and I was chained to the country! And after twenty years in the East, without a break, I got out of English ways, and lost sight of my old friends."

"And what about your children, sir?"

"Oh, they were educated regardless of expense, and thanks to Julia's fine connections well started in the world; but I never saw them; no, not since they were with their ayah, and I put them aboard a mail steamer in Madras Roads, when the eldest was only four. Meanwhile, I was up to my neck in debt, and although commanding a regiment, worse off than a junior subaltern. I was positively ashamed of my uniform, my chargers, and my stinginess—but what could I do? Tell me that?"

"Er—well, nothing, I suppose," murmured the young man.

"No, I was too deep in the soucars' books, ever to get my head above water; socially I was dead, with a stone round my neck. Well, my boys got professions, the girl married well. Then my wife died; we had not met for years, but she wrote to me regularly every mail, and sent me newspapers.—I had thoughts of going home."

"And so you went at last?"

"No, though I had retired, and got my pension; an old comrade persuaded me to join him in the Hills, and something else held me back—it was India herself. Twice I took my passage, and twice I changed my mind—eventually I lived with my friend till he died. He left me all he had; plate, books, and a large fortune—the result of loot, and good investments—besides this, I have twelve hundred a year pension, and savings, and am at this moment a wealthy man. You'd never suspect it, would you?" and he waved his withered hand at the ugly pink walls, old black furniture, and threadbare Bangalore carpet.

" No, sir, I must say I would not."

" No, I'm like a native chap, who may live in a sort of open cupboard in the bazaar, and yet own lakhs of rupees. The tidings of my riches soon reached my family, and they bombarded me with letters and cables, and were desperately anxious to get the old man home! They were afraid he might fall under an undesirable influence, or do something foolish; but my pal forbid me ever to let them have a penny of his money; he used to say ' Your family only know you by your signature on a cheque, you've done your share, educated them, put them out in the world and they are strangers.' "

" And so you married again! "

" Yes, yes, yes," was the irritable response. " Don't you hurry me— don't you hurry me! I'm too old for that! I did the *foolish* thing my sons dreaded, and married a woman who had nursed my friend, Tom Maitland. After three or four years, the Hills became too smart and fashionable for a retired old Indian, who had married a nurse—my lady neighbours would not know Mrs. Beamish, and the young generation of soldiers had never heard of *me*. My family plagued me incessantly, and more than once hinted at the effects of a climate on my brain. After all, I was only seventy, and stout and hale, still well able for a day's shooting in the sholahs, or hunting on the downs; so I just disappeared down the Seegoor Ghat, taking all my goods and chattels, and leaving no address. You can cover up tracks when you like,—it is only a question of *money*."

" You mean bribes? "

" I mean just money. Your Uncle was rich, and thanks to that, he has hidden himself successfully."

" Then you really think he *is* hidden? " asked Mallender, eagerly.

" Not a doubt of it, and if you will take the advice of an old man, you will waste no more time on searching for a will-o'-the-wisp, but just go home quietly."

"Oh—do you advise that!"

"Yes; though I funked going home myself! but that was different, I had spent the best of my life out here, and the country would not release me. You may think me a queer sort of lunatic, but my case is not uncommon; quite a number of old retired officers, and officials, remain in India after their work is done; they are out of touch with England, and life is easier here. You find them in the Doon, and in parts of the Himalayas, in the Neilgherries, the Shevaroys, and not men alone,—but women too."

"Women?" repeated Mallender, and his tone was incredulous.

"Yes, forty years ago in Bangalore, there was an old lady, the widow of the Colonel of a Madras regiment. I remember her well; she accompanied the 86th M.N.I. in all their moves. She used to ride a venerable white charger, and wear a mushroom hat with rosettes over her ears, and come up on the *maidan* soon after sunrise, and before the crowd appeared. I've seen her of an evening, driving her little ponies shopping, or at the band,—when it was *her* band. She never mixed in Society, but went to church, and to field days when her regiment was out. She spent most of her pension on the lines, and the men adored her, and called her their mother; the regiment was her home. Her people, like mine, were scandalized; but, after all, why should not everyone lead the life they prefer—if they do no harm to their fellows? And now about this puzzle, your Uncle—a life here was obviously not one that he preferred, the country had no hold on him, no,—yet he is here. Brown and Co. are not a firm to make foolish mistakes. My advice to you is, to go home, where time, friends, and fortune are all before you."

"Not fortune," protested Geoffrey. "I forfeited that when I undertook this enterprise, but then I was sure that I was dealing with an impostor."

"And would not listen to Brown and Co.,—that, I may tell you, was foolish."

"No, neither to them, or anyone."

"Ah, but you will listen to your past experience, and to *me*," and the weary old figure leant abruptly forward in its chair.

"I can't bear to be beaten, sir, but what do you advise?"

"As I've said—arrange for your return. In the meantime, make your headquarters here; there is a good horse for you, Tom and Tara will take you out, and show you the country, and of an evening come and sit and talk to me—give me a week or two—as a great favour to an old fellow, who has not spoken to another red coat for thirty years."

Mallender hesitated a moment, then he said, "You are very kind, sir."

"Not a bit of it—only kind to myself. There is a new brown, stud-bred, up from Ussour, that will carry you well. This is an historical part of the world, although it looks so tame now—the children know every inch of it for miles. Tell me, are you interested in Indian history?"

"I can't say I am, sir, I know very little about it. Clive—Plassy—Warren Hastings—that's all."

"I was the same myself, till I was tied here by the leg, and had to take to books. I've read a lot—especially of those dealing with this country—its history begins with the invasion of Alexander, nearly three hundred years before Christ, then came the Moghul Empire, and the Cholas, they *all* made their way into these parts."

"Not much sign of them now, is there?"

"No, and I dare say there won't be much sign of *us* after a couple of thousand years. We shall leave no great monuments, temples and fortresses, such as still recall ancient Hindostan."

And then, with surprising animation, he suddenly poured forth a brief description of campaigns, marches, victories, and defeats.

"Think," he cried, "of a desperate siege that lasted

ten years—think of the loot and treasure. Why, when Bednur fell, they took twenty millions in gold—gold worth a thousand times more then than now, not to speak of jewels, elephants and slaves." Coming to later days, he spoke of "Haidir Ali," Lally, and Tippoo.

"Haidir was an adventurer—a nobody—but a brave man. His son Tippoo, was just a mad fanatic. For close on two hundred years battles and struggles have swept across these plains. Please God, we have seen the last of them! Well, well, well, I'm a doddering old fellow, and I'm boring you; but you must ride about the country, with Tara and Tom, and see it for yourself! Ah!" as his visitor stood up, "you are not off yet! Before you go, let me show you my Europe family—give me that sandal-wood box from the whatnot."

When this was placed in his hands, he opened it, and turned over its contents with tremulous deliberation.

"Here," exhibiting a stout elderly man in uniform, "is my son Arnold; he married money. This is my daughter Agatha, in court train. She is the Honble. Mrs. Dashell. This is my lawyer son, who threatens me with the Lunacy Commissioners," exhibiting a man with a clever hard face, and a sunken determined mouth. "All capital photos, you see, sent to *tempt* the old fellow home! If anything could tempt me, it would be this," and after a little fumbling, he placed a striking vignette of Mrs. Villars in the hand of his amazed companion. "Here is my grand-daughter, Lena."

"Mrs. Villars!—why, I know her!" exclaimed Mallender. "Is *she* your grand-daughter? She was staying in Madras, with my cousins the Tallboys."

"So she said; she writes distracted letters asking for money, they all ask for that; one to send a boy to Eton, another to settle a son on a ranche, a third to pay bills; but of the whole pack, Lena is the most hungry and shameless. You see, I get their letters forwarded through my agent. They amuse me,—and they tell on one another. Lena is a beauty. Eh?"

"Yes, and this does not flatter her in the least."

"Lena is like her grandmother, but handsomer, and has the same mad craze for spending. She married a man, a good fellow too, I was told, and ruined him with her extravagance. They say Lena is one of those who must have luxuries,—no matter who goes without; and four years ago, poor Villars put an end to himself, and his troubles, with an overdose of chloral. She writes to me now for a couple of thousand to pay some debts, as she is at her wits' end. Begad, I believe she really came out here to poke about and find *me!*" the idea tickled the old gentleman, and he gave a shrill cackling laugh, "and got as far as Madras, where she has spent the winter with an old schoolfellow."

"Yes, with my cousin Fanny Tallboys, but surely they were not schoolfellows—it is impossible, why, Fanny is forty-two!"

"Oh, Lena is getting on; Lena is no chicken!" declared her grandfather, "though I dare say she looks years younger than her age. She writes begging letters, and implores me to assist her, as she is likely to make a brilliant marriage. Heaven help the unfortunate beggar!—for a beggar he will *be*."

"She does not mention his name, I suppose?"

"No, but I presume he is rich; his money will run through her hands like water. Mrs. Beamish is dead set against my pretty grand-daughter—she cannot bear her, and wanted to burn the photograph. I believe she is afraid Lena may turn up here, and get round *me*. Ha! ha! ha! If Lena only knew what *I* do, about a certain treasure!"

"You mean a hidden one?"

"Yes, India is full of such hoards, especially before the days of banks. The inherited habit of accumulating and hiding gold and jewels, is in the blood. A native whose life I saved, a cultivator and poor, told me the secret of a great cache, he said he could not meddle with it himself—an old man with no sons, he would be robbed, and murdered. Buried within twenty miles

of where you and I are sitting, is a mass of gold and jewels, silver horse trappings, and arms. Well! well! the world is rich enough. Money is the root of all evil!"

"But some of the world is poor enough—desperately poor," protested Mallender. "Think of what all this wealth, lying useless and unclaimed, would do."

"Some would do good; more would stick to greedy palms. I do give a help at home, and out here—dispensaries, and wells, and things. No, no, I'll not touch the great spoil, I've enough to leave my family in comfort. If Lena got her claws into this treasure, she'd squander even it, in ten years. I may tell you that this horde was hidden away in the troubled times of the eighteenth century. I suppose you know that Tippoo's pearls were never discovered?"

"No! Well, I wish *I* could find them!"

"Oh, you are no good at finding!" scoffed the old man. "You can't even find your own Uncle."

"Now, Richard, you have talked too much," interposed Mrs. Beamish, who had entered in her noiseless slippers. "Your voice is as weak as a thread, come away: Captain Mallender will give you a pull up—it's *long* past the time for your midday sleep, and you've never touched your bread and milk, you bad old man!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"Tom and I are going to take you round the place this afternoon," announced Tara. "We want to show you the old remains; afterwards we will go through the native city, and bazaar, and wind up with tennis. How will that be?"

"Quite a gay programme, I do declare!" replied Mallender.

"Yes, and to-morrow you shall see the country. Can you ride?"

"Rather!" was his prompt answer.

"Oh, I'm glad you say 'rather' in that tone,—for Sepoy, the new brown, is a hard puller."

"I prefer a hard puller. Gives you something to hold on to," rejoined the new-comer with a laugh.

As soon as the sun began to slant a little towards the west, Mallender set out on a tour of inspection, escorted by his two companions. First, they came to the officers' bungalows; of these, many of the roofs had fallen in, the gardens were a high jungle of tall grasses, custard apples, and guava trees; the only signs of a human abode were the tottering gate piers,—still sentries to a dead home—and the outline of a long-choked well. Before the most obliterated, Tom halted and said:

"The Governor has often been to parties and tiffins here. He says the prettiest woman in the regiment lived in this bungalow, with the whole station at her feet."

Some of the quarters were still standing, in spite of great chasms in their tiled roofs. Into one of these, Tara led the way, explaining:

"We call this 'Lucia's Bungalow,' for here on this window-frame is carved—'Lucia' and a heart. See?"

Yes, there it was, still distinctly legible, inscribed by a firm male hand.

"Her grave is in the cemetery," added the girl. "She was only twenty, I put flowers on it every Sunday, and many on others too—but they seem *all* asking me to care for them—poor forgotten people!"

"Now let us go on to the barracks," urged Tom, the ever-restless, leading the way from Lucia's Bungalow. "The General joined the regiment there seventy-seven years ago. They say that Government was going to pull the place down, only it would cost too much money, and they have no use for the stone,—there being no railway."

"Can you believe that this was once full of soldiers?" enquired Tara, as they entered and gazed upon a vast open square. The building was more of a fortress than barracks, having been erected in the days when the country was overrun by Mysorians and Mahrattas. The outer walls were pierced for guns, the windows and

verandahs faced inwards to the parade-ground—now overgrown with jungle, and coarse yellow grass, where grazed a couple of lethargic buffaloes. Part of the men's quarters were hopelessly dilapidated, but other portions still exhibited time-defying teak stairs, heavy teakwood doors, and solid chunam pillars.

"It's pretty safe, shall we go up?" suggested Tom, and he led the way along its echoing upper verandahs—from whence they peered into forlorn, bat-haunted barrack-rooms—still exhibiting the marks of where punkahs had once hung. Down below in the square, there was now no sound of voices, tramping feet, or bugle calls, nothing but a steady "crop, crop" of the buffaloes, and from the distant city the faint complacent throbbing of a tom-tom.

Tom and Tara were engaged in a prolonged altercation on the subject of "manners," the two were frequently at loggerheads,—though they never actually quarrelled—she accused him of rudely pushing up the stairs before her, whilst he apostrophised her as "a silly ass." Meanwhile, Mallender stood somewhat apart, gazing through a broken aperture, over the sun-steeped outlook, with its rose-tinted plains, and shadowy blue horizon. As he gazed, he began faintly to realise the fascination of this old mysterious land, with its subtle appeal, that baffles all attempts at description. His thoughts instinctively turned to the General's tales of camps, and combats, marches and victories; to "old-forgotten, far-off things, and battles long ago"; through the evening's golden haze his mind's eye seemed to behold the approach of an imposing train of war elephants, careering horsemen, streaming standards, and ponderous guns. The vision was abruptly dispelled by a vigorous thump on the back.

"I say! You seem to be moonstruck or something," exclaimed Tom. "If we are to play tennis, we must look sharp. It's past four o'clock, and the Beaufort girls will be coming to fetch us with ropes and lanterns."

"Oh, all right," agreed Mallender, "but, mind you, I'm an awful duffer at tennis," and he followed Tara and her brother down the steep resounding stairs.

Tennis was played on two large kunker courts, not far from Beaufort's quarters, and close by on an ancient bandstand were disposed chairs and a table, with tea, lemonade and pegs, presided over by the General's bearded butler. As anticipated, the explorers proved to be the last arrivals, and found awaiting them two anxious Miss Beauforts, racquets in hand; looking wonderfully sleek and smiling in spotless white frocks.

Captain Beaufort was arrayed in a gaudy flannel suit, and a sailor hat at least three sizes too small. Miss Lily presented with *empressement* a thin, dark youth wearing a red satin tie, and many gilt rings, as Alonzo Perez; also a bluff police officer, whose name Mallender did not catch, and as Miss Lily called him "Chorlie" every two minutes, he was compelled to do the same!

Tennis proved strenuous indeed. The new-comer was out of practice, and he and Tara were easily disposed of by Blanche and "Chorlie." Humble and defeated, Mallender withdrew to a seat on the bandstand, and proceeded to watch a hard-fought contest between Tom and Lily, Perez and Jessie. Jessie's service was as that of a strong and determined man—her volleys were deadly, her activity tireless—apparently she was made of wire and india-rubber,—a matchless lady champion!

Presently Blanche approached, then she sat down, sidled nearer to the onlooker, and began to question him, with her soft, see-saw voice, and liquid, enraptured eyes. Almost before he was aware, Mallender found himself promising to write in her album, to take her photograph, and give one of his own in exchange. Alas, poor Blanche! being dark herself, this reserved young man—who served so stupidly into the net—only admires blue eyes and fair hair, so your innocent coquetry is entirely wasted.

When the dusk fell with its Eastern suddenness, the party went off to play badminton by lamp-light in the old racket court, but Mallender, with the excuse that he had letters to write, returned to the Dâk Bungalow. Here he was received by the Maty with a soup-plate in his hand, on which lay two letters. One was in a strange handwriting, the other from Nancy Brander. He opened the latter first, and calling for a candle, sat down to read it.

"Dear Geoffrey," it began,

"I do wonder where you are, and what you are doing? The other day I met a Major and Mrs. Rochfort, and their lovely little girl; they are all three devoted to you, and told me that you had stayed with them recently,—of course in England. It seems rather late for them to bring a child out here, and—though it was not my business, with my usual audacity I offered Mrs. Rochfort my opinion gratis. Uncle and Aunt are going strong; she often talks of you, and asks me for your news. He never—this is so unlike the little man, who is not naturally dour, or unforgiving; but, my dear twenty-first cousin, I now understand that it is not so much 'the cutting of your own throat,' as he calls it, that he objects to,—he has a far more serious charge against you, which Fanny breathed to me only yesterday. Our kindly Mrs. Fiske has informed him, that the passage money for Ada Sim was paid by *you*, and as I write with one hand I cover my blushes with the other, since I must add, that Mrs. F. solemnly assured Uncle Fred, that you had your own very good reasons for getting Miss Sim out of the country! Mrs. Fiske, ever ready to impute base motives, had the story absolutely pat; she was told it by Mrs. Wylie, whose husband came upon you in the shrubbery. He said Miss Sim was crying like blazes, and had her arms wound about your neck! He also overheard you arrange for another merry meeting, and added, that he was in Cook's office when you paid for the lady's passage.

That was like your generosity, and I believe in it, and nothing else,—neither does Fan, but Fred is peculiarly sensitive about a man's good name—especially when his name is Mallender—and he always thought you a sort of Galahad, and in fact most frightfully respectable. Now he has changed his mind. Hence his silence. This really is a hateful story, and the telling of it has afforded Mrs. Fiske some very delicious minutes. However, I had the satisfaction of assuring her, that bar the generosity to an unfortunate, homeless girl, the rest was lies,—and so she cuts me, and has returned me a whole sheaf of my own visiting-cards!

"Our latest fashionable intelligence is—let me prepare you for a shock—the engagement of Lena Villars to Sir Billy. He is the envy of all men in our upper world; she, of the women. He has given her such diamonds! I fancy, all the same, that the Sea Lion will keep the Syren in subjection, and chain her to a rock; at any rate, round dances and men's Christian names are now barred.

"No news of your Uncle, I presume? How I should like to put the thumb-screw on Brown and Brown! Is it not maddening to feel that they *know!* Tom sends his salaams. He believes your Uncle is 'purdah' somewhere, and asks me to tell you that he is looking forward to your paying us a long visit before you go home. You have only to send a wire, and your room will be ready. We go down the 15th, leaving Babs with Auntie,—for the present she will be her only girl! I hope she won't betroth her to some eligible little boy. By the way, I hear that *you* are bespoke by Mota Rochfort! Be sure and write to me soon, and tell me of *all* your adventures.

"Yours sincerely,

"NANCY BRANDER."

Mallender turned over the letter, and looked at the date, it was a month old. He read it through once more, with compressed lips, a knitted brow, and somewhat embittered memories.

What a meddling fool he was! always doing the wrong thing. He had carried out his father's wishes, and come to most unholy grief. He had tried to help a wretched girl, and had the worst construction put upon his action.

And Fred believed these lies! As for that cad Wylie, he would like to wring his neck. After quite a long interval, he picked up and opened letter Number 2, which was written in a weak uncertain hand, and glanced at the signature, "Ever most gratefully yours, Ada Sim."

By Jove, here was a coincidence! What had *she* got to say for herself? A slip of paper fell out,—a cheque, a cheque for one hundred pounds, "payable to Captain Geoffrey Mallender"; a sum as unexpected as it was welcome. This would take him nicely down country, and pay *his* passage to England!

"CRAIG BIRNIE,
"INVERNESS-SHIRE, N.B.

"DEAR CAPTAIN MALLENDER,

"I have been very ill—or would have written to you long before. As it is, this is my first attempt at writing letters for two months. I have great pleasure in enclosing a cheque for £100, the money you so generously lent me.

"You may wonder how I came by it? I do think my ill-luck has turned at last. I travelled home with a man who knew my bachelor Uncle—Mr. Andrew Campbell—my mother's brother,—he and my father had a quarrel, and never forgave one another—he was very rich, father very poor and proud, and so it was never made up! My kind fellow-passenger put in a good word for *me*, with the result that I had an interview with Uncle Andrew in London, and after spending two days together, he offered to adopt me as his daughter, and give me a home. Immediately after this unexpected good fortune, and just as I had arrived here, I had typhoid fever badly, and have been at death's door, but am now out of danger, and sitting up.

"My Uncle asks me to send you his most heartfelt thanks, and to say that when next you cross the Border, he hopes to see you at Craig Birnie, and can promise you the best of shooting. As for me, I *never* can thank you. That afternoon, when you found me in the shrubbery, I had come to the end of *everything*. If you see Mrs. Tallboys, and Mrs. Brander, please give them my love. They shall hear from me shortly. I hope you will be able to read this pencil scrawl. It has taken me two days to write.

"Ever most gratefully yours,

"ADA SIM."

This letter, evidently written with effort, and by a feeble hand, was as balm to Mallender's wounded feelings. So there *was* some good in the world after all! Acting on the impulse of the moment, he enclosed the epistle in a sheet of paper marked "Private," thrust it into an envelope which he addressed to Mrs. Brander. At any rate, he would clear himself in her eyes—yes, and in Fanny's; and having handed his exculpation over to Anthony, and told him to post it without fail, he scribbled a note of apology to Mrs. Beamish, and dined at home, on curried vegetables, and the contents of his dâk.

CHAPTER XXV

A VAST crowd, assembled about the south verandah, astonished Mallender, as he walked up to the General's quarters in order to fetch his horse. On approaching nearer, he discovered that this gathering was not, as he had feared, the scene of an accident, but a multitude of the blind, halt, and lame, all waiting to be treated by the kind hands of Mrs. Beamish. It proved to be an army composed of woeful cases; here a man with elephantiasis,—his leg the size and shape of a pillar; there a woman, with a child in her arms, a prey to oph-

thalmia, a sickening spectacle; people suffering from fever, and ague, and even leprosy, abounded.

Invested in a mushroom topee, and loose white jacket, seated behind a large table Mrs. Beamish reigned supreme; interviewing and prescribing for her patients —one by one; whilst two sharp-looking servants assisted her. Dozens and dozens of bottles of all sorts, and sizes, from a soda-water to a scent bottle, were being promptly filled, corked, and delivered.

"This is my dispensary morning," she called out to Mallender, over the heads of the crowd. "I have a certificate, and know something about the dispensing of drugs." She beckoned him to come up the steps. "Look at my clients—has any doctor in Harley Street such a practice?"

"No, I am sure he has not," replied the young man, as his glance swept over the crowd;—at the moment the eyes of all the patients were centred on himself. —"What misery!" he exclaimed, "isn't it *too* awful?"

"Misery? yes, and what patience! I do what I can, but it's not much," and she gazed at her surroundings with a wistful expression. "Well now, I cannot have you taking up my precious time, *you* do not need to consult me! The children, and the horses, are waiting for you by the back verandah, don't let them break any of your bones. My hands, as you see, are full, I do not want another job!"

"Let us first of all take a turn round the race-course," said Tara, as the trio pranced out of the compound—the lady riding a beautiful bay Arab, Tom a sturdy New Zealand cob, and the guest a fine stud-bred from Ossour.

"Race-course!" he echoed, "I did not think there was one nearer than Bangalore."

"But there is," replied the girl, "and what is more, I will race you from the stand to the red Sawmy stone; it is exactly one mile."

"All right," he agreed, "it's a match!"

"The General remembered the whereabouts," explained Tom, "and got the course a bit cleared for us to exercise on—but it's little better than the ordinary *maidan*, though it has no nullahs, and not many holes."

"Sounds like good going!" rejoined Mallender, with a laugh, "You'll let me know when we come to it, won't you?"

This information was necessary, as the course was but vaguely indicated by a few scattered white posts.

"Here we are," suddenly announced Tara, "that big mound you see over there, was once the grand stand—shall we make it the starting-post? Tom, you can start us!"

The trio trotted across the lumpy ground to the so-called "post," and after a short delay Tom gave a shrill whistle, and the match commenced. Sepoy, the stud-bred, was boisterously fresh; he bucked and did his best to get his head down, but it was no use—on this occasion he had a master on his back—and presently gave up the struggle, and settled into his stride. He was fast, the blood of Orme was in his veins, and he had the legs of the bounding bay Arab. As the riders galloped along, the cool morning wind blowing past their ears sang a gay duet with the thudding hoofs; and Mallender felt roused to real enjoyment. After all, his wanderings had now and then *one* bright moment,—a few gleams of compensation, such as this! Finally the brown won with ridiculous ease, passing the post ten lengths ahead of Rustum.

"Oh, dear, so you've beaten us!" and Rustum's rider, looking rather crestfallen, her linen habit spattered with foam, joined Mallender. "*I* have always beaten Tom!" she gasped out breathlessly.

"Yes," added Tom, storming up on the excited cob, "but I'm a couple of stone heavier than Mallender for one thing, and the brown plays cup and ball—and goes as he likes, with *me!*"

"Captain Mallender rides as well as Archie," admitted Tara, with a bright blush.

"Archie," echoed her brother, "is not in the same field—don't hit me, Tar! but," turning to Mallender, "I expect you have been used to horses all your life?"

"Yes; and I've hunted, and played a good deal of polo."

"And ridden races, I'll bet?"

"Only regimental," was the modest reply.

"Poor Tar, what a chance *you* had!" jeered her brother. "Now let us get away into the open country."

"Then you don't call this open?" questioned the stranger.

"Oh, no, wait till you see the real plains."

In a short time the trio were cantering over the coarse hard grass, through scrubby jungle, past great red boulders, across sandy river-beds, and dry water-courses, occasionally avoiding a yawning nullah, that looked as if it opened into the very bowels of the earth. Once, on a flat rock, they descried a large bright green snake coiled up asleep. Once, they skirted a shrine, where a worshipper had just sacrificed a kid to "Kali." Tara it was who led the way, skimming along, on her light-footed Arab, riding with a certain wild grace, but it was not the same horsewomanship as exhibited by Barbie Miller—that was a masterful, and finished performance!

Walking and talking, cantering and galloping, the little party covered about twelve miles, and then in the golden morning turned their faces homewards, Mallender carrying with him the impression of wide yellowish plains with purple shadows, scattered rocks and jungle, one or two deserted temples, and a melancholy sense of space and desolation.

"This is the wild side," explained Tara, "at the other, they grow crops; heaps of cotton, ragi, cholum and oil seed, and send it down country. This evening we will introduce you to the great bazaar, a native town—and you will see what rich neighbours we have."

The only bazaar that Mallender had yet explored, was the Gorah Bazaar, in Madras; this, at Wellunga,

was entirely different. In the first place, although it was teeming with human life, there was not a single European to be seen, nor even a Eurasian,—all were natives of the country. Truly here was "India for the Indians!" The stalls displayed no Western requirements; but grain, condiments, strange sweets, coloured cottons, and muslins, piles of silk of local manufacture in vermilion, orange, indigo, pink and green; also turbans, and tinselled caps of all colours. Here, were working jewellers with their little braziers; huka makers, weavers of spells, and public letter writers. The long narrow streets reeked with the intangible but familiar bazaar odour (a mixture of oil, grain, aromatic spices, and raw cotton). Crowds were chaffing, gossiping, or strolling along. Here and there, a tall, bold-looking woman covered with jewellery, and painted with khol, passed with a defiant glare; gaily caparisoned horses with jewelled girths, and head-bands—their manes and tails dyed rose colour, were led snorting by, disturbing the little sacred bulls, who were poking wet black noses into the open gram baskets.

"Those are Raka's stud!" explained Tom, "he likes to show them off. They are bitted up, poor brutes, till their necks are nearly broken. No wonder they are vicious! I hear he is getting two motor-cars from Madras."

"In that case," declared Tara, "his rival will send for four. Rakar and he are outward friends, and deadly enemies; both are grain merchants, money-lenders, and enormously rich. Here is Rakar now!" as an obviously important individual appeared, riding a prancing horse—held with evident difficulty by two men,—a gigantic white Kathiawari, his mane and tail a glowing pink, a band of gold and stones flashed above his furious eyes; his nostrils were scarlet, figuratively they breathed fire and slaughter, and the great animal appeared ready to break loose, and rend the whole bazaar!

Rakar, a keen-looking man of forty, salaamed with

both hands as he passed by on his demonstrative charger.

"In old days, he would have had to get off his horse, when he met *us*," said Tara, as she scanned him with haughty eyes.

"I think he feels safer where he is; the horse would probably eat him," rejoined Mallender. He was secretly uncomfortable, and anxious to get Miss Beamish out of this highly-spiced, staring crowd,—but he had no occasion for misgiving and uneasiness. The General and all his house were held in high favour, and respect, in the native city.

"I think it is time for me to pay my evening visit to your father," he remarked at last.

"So it is," agreed Tom, "I saw the parents drive home a good while ago; all right, let us get a move on." For this manœuvre, Tom was always prepared.

"So I hear you've done the bazaar," said the old man, to Mallender, as he entered. "What do you think of it?"

"Well, sir, it gives me an idea of what India is—without *us*. It might still be 1700, for all the signs of advancement—I saw people wearing horn spectacles, writing with wood, and buying spells! But I hear that Rakar, the rich merchant, is getting motors,—the roads are capital, I wonder you never thought of one, you can travel over a good bit of country, and without fatigue."

"I declare it's strange, that it never occurred to me! but begad, yes, I'll have one! it will be a change from our three miles out, three miles in. Why, man, I'll get down to Seringapatam, Mysore, Bangalore! How can I buy a car, a good one?"

"In Madras. If I go down, I can choose it for you."

"So you can, but you are not gone yet. Tell me your plans, my boy. Have you made them?—and how are you off for money?"

"All right, thank you."

"Now, that is nonsense," he answered, querulously. "I know your Uncle cut your income, and the house swallowed your capital. How will you live?—you must let the old man give you a hand."

"I'll let the place, and get some interest that way; the shooting is poor, but it's a fine old house and park, and might bring in a few hundreds a year, so I shan't starve, but I hate having nothing to do. I'll try and get into the Territorials, or some other billet."

"Yes, and then I suppose you'll marry! Well, take my advice, young man, benefit by *my* experience—and look well before you leap!"

* * * * * *

The morning rides were sometimes postponed till afternoon,—especially now that there was a beautiful moon, and one day Tara said:

"This evening, you must come to the haunted battle-field, Captain Mallender,—then you will hear something that will surprise you."

"Oh, I often hear things that surprise me; no later than this morning at tennis, Miss Blanche told me, that she was in 'a state of nature!'"

"Poor girl! you must not laugh at her. They have had a scanty education, but are wonderfully adaptable and quick at picking up things. When—when," colouring faintly, "I live in the Hills, I shall ask them on a visit; even a little station will be gay to them."

"Lily will not leave home," declared Tom, "she could not tear herself away from Perez. That will be a match, you will see."

"Never mind Lily, but do look at the sunset," urged Tara; the little party had made their way westward, and were approaching the scene of more than one desperate struggle and conflict. As her companions raised their eyes, they found themselves contemplating a transcendent scene—extraordinary even in that land of sunsets: soft roseate clouds set jewel-wise in an ocean of dazzling gold.

A jealous full moon was stealthily creeping up, and an evening breeze that accompanied her gently swayed the long coarse grass and cotton plants. Presently and almost abruptly, the dying sun turned from a beauteous

rose to a vivid and tragic red,—the shade of blood and death !—it filled the plains and pools of water with its sinister and terrible reflection, and the soft evening zephyr, struck suddenly chill.

" Here is the place, stand still, my steed ! " quoted the girl. " I know it by the block, that looks like a pillar and is covered with figures. They say it's an ' Asoka ' stone, and very old. It is just about here, on this sandy stretch, that you can hear them."

" Hear what ? Scorpions or snakes ? " asked Mallender in a chaffing way.

Tara ignored his question with an air of affronted dignity. Occasionally she could assume an amazingly proud, exclusive air,—and turning to her brother, said :

" Tom, if you will hold the horses, Captain Mallender can come with me. Please to follow," commanded the young lady, as soon as she had alighted. " You may hear nothing, as you are so unbelieving, but again, you may hear something that you will never forget."

After they had walked about a hundred yards, she turned abruptly to face her companion, and said :

" Now, you must take off your cap and kneel down here and listen." As she spoke, she sank bare-headed on the sand, and without a word, Mallender meekly followed her example.

What an extraordinary girl ! Was she playing him a trick ? Tara was given to mild practical jokes, but it was going rather too far ; to bring him fifteen miles, and plant him on his knees in the middle of an empty plain. For some time there was no sound, beyond the impatient stamping of the horses and jingling of their bits, and at the end of ten minutes Mallender ventured a protest.

" I say, Miss Tara, is not this getting a bit monotonous ? I expect they have another engagement."

" Hush ! Hush ! " she answered authoritatively. " Don't speak ! Wait !—They—are coming."

Mallender was inclined to whistle, " The Campbells are coming," but was afraid of the young lady's dis-

pleasure. Her occasional air of aloofness and command impressed and surprised, though it entirely failed to crush him.

What an awful ass he must look! Why was not Tom roaring with laughter? As he bent his head nearer to the ground, a noxious carrion bird swept so obtrusively close to him that he started involuntarily, and was sensible of an extraordinary sensation of sickening repulsion. What was that? A bugle-call! Yes, he heard it distinctly; from the far distance came another, immediately followed by a brisk roll of drums, then drums and fifes—accompanied by the tramp and thunder of an approaching host. The ground seemed to tremble and vibrate under the tread of a large body of troops who were rapidly advancing,—and yet, amazing sensation, these troops were nowhere to be seen.

Mallender stared about in stupefied bewilderment; not a soldier was visible, merely the empty moon-flooded plains, that appeared to be suddenly bereft of all warmth and life—and although there was not a breath of wind, the long grass and cotton plants, were shivering.—*Why?* As gradually as they approached, so gradually did the sound of tramping feet become fainter, yet fainter, and finally died away; one far-distant bugle-call sounded a piercing, lingering, almost agonized challenge—then followed complete, absolute, and ghastly silence.

Geoffrey Mallender was sensible of being unaccountably chilled and overawed; he felt as if he had suddenly stirred the springs of some obscure dread—had been brought to the edge of another sphere! Possibly the experience would pass, would soon be explained, derided, and forgotten; but for a moment this glimpse of the unknown had made his heart beat unusually fast, and his dark hair to lie in damp rings upon his clammy forehead. As he rose hastily to his feet and looked at his companion, Tara's hands dropped from her face, her great grey eyes were fixed upon him with an expres-

sion of awe, as they confronted one another in the mystic brilliancy of moonlight. At last she said:

"Now you know what I mean by *them*."

"I do indeed," he replied with undeniable sincerity. "The most extraordinary experience; a British column on the march! Did you hear the drums and fifes?"

"Yes, of course, and always at the time you think the tune is familiar—and yet never, never,—try as you will, can you recall it."

"But what does it all mean?"

"Who knows? Some say, a body of troops passed here to their death, others, that that is folly, and the sounds have a natural explanation; something to do with the air and echoes and refraction. All I can tell you for certain is, that if you come here when the moon is at the third quarter, and only then, between sunset and eight o'clock, you can hear the troops go by. Tom has heard them, so have Mr. Strong and Perez, and I, and now you! Never Jessie, or the Beauforts, because they cannot ride at all—much less fifteen miles."

"And you think——?"

"That it is a part of Lord Cornwallis's old army, who were led into an ambush, and butchered; what do you say?"

"I will let Shakespeare answer, 'There are more things in earth and heaven, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.'"

"At any rate, you will allow that it is neither scorpions or snakes, but something uncanny."

"I allow that," said Mallender with emphasis. "I will even admit I felt thoroughly scared. That last bugle-call made me shake all over!"

"So you heard them?" enquired Tom, as they joined him.

"Yes, and it's the most weird hearing, bar none, I've ever experienced!"

"No doubt there are mysterious happenings in this blessed old country. Things no one can explain; black magic and spells, and devil worship. Well, while you

two have been listening to the march of ghostly soldiers, I've had a high old time with these three brutes. Now we must be getting home. I'm starving, and we have a good fifteen miles between us and supper." As he concluded, Tom turned about, and put his cob into a sharp canter.

CHAPTER XXVI

The dâk had been duly laid with six good horses, and Mallender's departure definitely fixed for the morrow. To celebrate his last ride at Wellunga, the little party had ridden unusually far afield,—indeed so far that on a certain eminence Tara pointed out to him a faint grey line on the horizon which she believed to be Seringapatam! But the young lady was mistaken. Through the golden haze of distance, the eyes of her imagination had merely descried a city in the air! It was late as the riders approached Wellunga, the sun was hot, and the animals were pretty well done, when within a couple of hundred yards of the General's bungalow, they heard frenzied yells from the direction of the bazaar, and coming from the same quarter, beheld a rolling cloud of yellow dust. As the dust gradually dispersed, there emerged from its shelter no less a sight than the processional horse—and man-eater! He was loose, and rapidly approaching with streaming pink mane and tail. At first, he seemed only affected by the delight and abandonment of utter freedom, as he galloped headlong, kicking, squealing, and uttering a shrill equine war cry! but soon he descried the three horses, and Rustum, being of high degree, flung back a defiant challenge. In a second, the Khatiawari was chasing him open-mouthed, and Tara, frantically lashing her Arab, turned to fly; but Rustum was tired, the pursuer fresh, and full of pride and gram. Screaming and open-mouthed, he drove his prey right on to the brink of a deep nullah. Here he intended to overtake and destroy him,—for the Khatiawari came of an old

native stock, who were bred and trained to kill, in the hideous horse-fights, so popular with the Rajahs of a bygone time.

Mallender instantly grasped the situation! There was not half a second to be lost; he wheeled about, drove his spurs into the brown, and with the intention of "riding him off," dashed between the monster and his victim.

The great white charger came thundering on, like some overwhelming, relentless force, and flung himself furiously with all his weight upon the intervener; there was a second's scrambling and scuffling, a crash of loose stones, and the next moment, the man and two horses had vanished,—been swallowed up by the yawning chasm.

The shrieks of the brutes were weird and blood-curdling, a mixture of rage, hate and agony. Meanwhile a howling, excited mob had come swarming out of the native town, and gathered round the scene; but no one appeared to be capable of doing anything beyond shout. Tara had dismounted, so had Tom! His face pale as death—of a dull shining whiteness; he looked dazed, and miserably uncertain what to do. As for Mrs. Beamish, the mainspring of the household, she sat in the verandah, facing the scene, with her apron over her head, her fingers in her ears endeavouring to deaden those ghastly sounds from the nullah; and truly, these were enough to freeze the marrow of the bones.

At this moment, an unexpected figure in every sense rose to the occasion. The old General, who for a long time had been unable to move unassisted, suddenly walked out into the compound, waving a stick—his scarlet dressing-gown fluttering behind him To the spectators, it was almost as if the dead had returned to life!—This aged tottering veteran had suddenly cast off the weight of years, and once more taken the field. The sight was as startling to the crowd as the recent, and still hideously audible, horror. A ghost among living men, Richard Beamish stood perfectly erect, his

old eyes flamed, his old voice shouted orders, he was as one inspired with a great spirit,—surely a miracle was wrought before their eyes!

In obedience to his orders, a peon ran to Tom with a loaded revolver, a number of men fetched well-ropes, a doolie was sent for, the apothecary summoned; all was done promptly, and by word of command. Presently Tom was lowered by ropes into the nullah, where he shot the Khatiawari through the brain;—the brown stud-bred was dead already. Next came the delicate and difficult task of extricating Mallender, and bringing him to the surface. Once there, and now that the screaming horses were no more, Mrs. Beamish became her normal self; a firm, well-trained, certificated nurse, and a messenger on the fastest horse in Wellunga was despatched to summon a doctor from a station fifty miles away. When the doolie was carried into the bungalow, bearing a still breathing man, the guiding spirit vanished; it was as if a bright flame had burst out, shone for a short time, flickered down, and expired.

The General was assisted to his chair, and once more relapsed into a huddled heap, a feeble old creature, who looked as if his backbone was shrunken and withered, shaking all over, from the reaction of an almost supernatural exertion.

His eyes fell on Tara,—white, stricken, and trembling.

"The child, thank God, is spared," and he lifted up his bony hands, "but the young fellow who saved her?"

"He is not dead, Richard," said his wife. "I have good hopes, and a surgeon will be here to-morrow. You have done wonders, and exhausted yourself; you must let Jessie and the *chokra* put you to bed, and I will give you a sedative."

"Bed—bed!" he muttered peevishly. "Bed at ten o'clock! Well, begad, it's all I'm fit for *now!*"

Mrs. Beamish devoted the whole of her time and attention to the injured man, and summoned Tara to assist her with sponges and bandages; but when the girl saw the ghastly death-like face, and the stream of

blood that pattered on to the matting, she fainted away, and the breathless "dresser," who had just appeared, succeeded to her post. In a miraculously short time the doctor arrived in a motor—the first that had ever penetrated into those parts—and after a careful examination of the patient, expressed his opinion that Mrs. Beamish and her assistant had done all that was immediately needful; the twisted ankle, the fractured arm, and the bites, might not have serious developments.

"The injury to the head is what I fear; it's in a dangerous place, and we may have inflammation, and suppuration," and he nodded gravely; "however, we will hope for the best. He looks a fine, healthy young fellow—all muscle. What's his name?"

"Mallender—Captain Mallender."

"What, the polo player?"

"I don't know; he rides splendidly, they say."

"He won't have a stick in his hand for many a day—if ever. I had better prepare you, and tell you that this crack in the back of his head may have an effect on the brain. He has had an uncommonly narrow squeak. Go on with the remedies, and I'll come again in two days." Then in another voice, he added, "I say, Mrs. Beamish, what a rum place you live in! My chauffeur had never heard of it, no more had I!"

"Yes, but it suits the old General—he prefers to be out of the world."

"Ah—'the world forgetting, by the world forgot!'"

"Oh, yes, we don't bother about society. Now, you must come and have some tiffin," added Mrs. Beamish hospitably. "It's all ready. I'm sorry you won't see my husband,—he is asleep."

"A great age, I understand."

"Yes, ninety-five next birthday."

"Well, ma'am, that speaks volumes for our much-abused Indian climate, doesn't it?"

"That is true, but then the General has a fine constitution, and a good conscience," declared his wife, with dignified complacency.

Thanks to the skilled nursing of Mrs. Beamish and Anthony's faithful attendance, Mallender, by slow degrees, crept back to this world—men in the prime and vigour of their youth do not die easily.—At first, his memory appeared to be a mere glimmering of things half seen, he took no interest in life, and was curiously lethargic.

When the doctor paid a final visit, he said to Mrs. Beamish :

" The young fellow is not fit to go to England ; his head would never stand the journey. Try and rouse him, keep him interested and amused, then get him by easy stages to some place in the Hills. In a couple of months, he may be all right."

" We can move him up to my coffee estate," suggested Tom. " It's an easy road, and only a hundred miles from this ; bearers and a doolie will do it in twenty-four hours."

" The very thing ! " agreed the doctor, " but don't leave him alone ; try and make him talk, talk to him,—and *rouse* him."

This was by no means a simple prescription ! Nothing seemed to rouse the invalid ; not dogs, or picture papers, or even the prolonged visits of the good-natured Beaufort girls, who deafened the sufferer with their chatter, and loaded him with flowers and sympathy ; but one day, after Tara had quitted the room, he said suddenly :

" Why is she so unlike—the others ? "

" Bless me ! That's a funny question," exclaimed Mrs. Beamish, laying down her sewing and surveying him critically.

" No," raising himself on his elbow. " Quite—quite—quite—what's the word ? She is different from—all of you—why ? "

Mrs. Beamish reflected for a moment, as she carefully threaded her needle ; her patient exhibited interest for the first time, should she tell him something that would possibly startle and stir his stagnant mind ?—or not ?

" Well, then you shall hear," she answered, after a long pause. " But it's a secret, and I know you can keep one."

He nodded indifferently, with closed eyes.

"Will you be surprised when I tell you that Tara is not our daughter?"

"No," slowly opening his eyes, "more surprised if she *was*!"

"She is no more related to us than you are, and that's the solemn truth!"

"But how—why? Where did she come from?"

Mrs. Beamish made a hasty sign with her hand.

"Now I'm going to tell you, what's only known to three people; if it came to Tara's ears she'd break her heart, she is so proud—so awfully proud. The Beamish's are a very good old family, and she sets great store by that."

"Go on, please," he urged with unexpected animation.

Mrs. Beamish rose and went over and carefully shut a lofty double door, then looked out into the verandah, finally sat down satisfied,—and began.

"It's over nineteen years and more, since the General being uncommonly hale and busy, I took a holiday to see my sister Susan, who was in bad health at Bangalore. Her husband was a missionary; they lived a bit out of the way, up towards the Arab lines, where rents were cheap. Well, I was nursing her through a bad go of fever, and one evening I heard a carriage rumble under the porch. I thought it might be someone for James; for he was a good kind man, and well known.—People often coming to him about charity, or to consult him when in trouble; so I thought nothing whatever of it, till I saw the ayah walking into the room with a very young baby in her arms! She was a queer flighty sort of creature, but honest and kind-hearted. She told me that a *gharry* with two horses had driven up, and the boy being busy in the cook-house she went out. There was only one person in the carriage, a stern-looking lady with diamonds in her ears, greyish hair, and proud eyes. She had an infant on her lap.

" 'I want to leave this little baby with Mrs. Haines for a day or two,' she said, 'as we have sickness in the house,' and with that she handed out the child, and its bottle, and a parcel of clothes. As soon as the ayah had it in her arms, the lady called out to the 'garriwan,' who drove away at a terrible pace. The night was pitch dark, but the ayah thought that they went towards Trinity Road.

"Well, from that day to this, no one ever called for the baby. We did all we could to trace her belongings, but it was just as if the whole thing had been a *dream*. Susan, my sister, did not like to send the poor child down to the Home in Madras, she was so sweetly pretty, and evidently came of gentle folk; though her clothes were not very grand, a fine diamond ring was tied up among them, and three hundred rupees in notes."

Mrs. Beamish paused for a moment; she noticed that her companion's attention was captured at last.

"I wrote to the General, and asked him what I was to do? Susan's health was poor, and James Haines did not take to a young infant; I must confess she cried a lot, and he had terribly broken nights; so Richard said, 'Bring her along, and pass her off as ours. Up here, no one will know, and another in the family makes no difference.' She was christened Tara, after a girl in a book that the General thought a lot of. He was for calling her Dora, after his first wife, but when he came to look into it, he said his wife Dora might not like to have him thinking of another Dora, and the poor baby a *nobody*—but we look on her, and love her, as our own—indeed, if the old man *has* a favourite, it's Tar!"

"So Tom and Jessie are not in the secret?"

"No one is in it out here but the General and myself, for Susan and James are dead; but some day I must tell Archie Murray."

"I never heard of anything so strange! I wonder if her people will ever trace and claim her?"

"Not likely; but if they did, we would not give

her up—unless she wished it. I believe Tara comes of high folk, however low their morals were," added Mrs. Beamish. "Just you look at her hand and foot, and the turn of her neck; and she has a sort of mocking imperious way at times, is a great stickler for manners, and always a wish to be *first*. The girl wants a strong hand, and Archie Murray has that. Tara has a warm loving heart, a great courage, and is extraordinarily generous. She'd give you her last morsel, but she expects a high place and a lot of ceremony."

"Well, now," folding up her work, "I've left you something new to think of, haven't I? and I must go and see if my old man has taken his soup."

Mrs. Beamish had indeed given her patient something to reflect on; and so the beautiful, imperious, indulged Tara was a nameless foundling; rescued and brought up by this good, charitable woman, as her very own!

* * * * * *

When the invalid was sufficiently recovered to creep about with a stick, and his arm in a sling, he often sat in the west verandah beside the General, whose sunken wistful eyes untiringly surveyed his beloved India and who liked to have Mallender near him,—although they rarely spoke. One was living in the past, the other's mind,—still somewhat blurred,—was anxiously scanning the future. At last even Mrs. Beamish admitted that Mallender was strong enough to adventure a journey, and it had come as on a previous occasion, to his last day.

Sitting beside the old man, he was astonished to hear him ask Tom to take down his sword, and bring it to him;—it was of an obsolete pattern with a hacked and dented brass scabbard, and its former wearer gazed at it, with a face drawn with emotion, then he said:

"My father gave me this in the year of our Lord, Eighteen hundred and thirty-five. I was a lad then; it has seen its share of service, and never, I thank God, been disgraced. I value it, next to my family here,

more than anything in the wide world." Reaching feebly forward, and laying it across the invalid's knees, he said, "See here, Mallender, I give it to *you*."

"To me, sir!" he exclaimed, in astonishment. "Oh, no—no. The sword must remain in the family as an heirloom, it should belong to Tom. You offer me a great honour, but——"

"But Tom is not a soldier," interrupted the General impatiently, "and he wishes it to go to you. Many and many a mile has that sword travelled, and clanked and jingled beside me," and the old man's head fell on his breast. "I'd like to know that at last, it will return to England,—and you will hang it up in your home, and now and then look at it, and think of the old, old soldier who wore it in India for fifty years." Suddenly his voice broke, and the hero of Lucknow, Aliwal, Gwalior and Jhansi, wept.

Even outlandish Wellunga boasted its own correspondent; a certain scribbling baboo, had a brother in the newspaper office of a little rag in Madras, and now and then at long intervals supplied him with a par. or two of fashionable intelligence.

About five weeks after Mallender had reached Tom Beamish's coffee estate, the following appeared in the said little rag.

"Fearful panic occurred here lately on the occasion of a most alarming affair. A terrible man-eating horse, value Rs. 2000, the property of our honourable Mr. Rakar, broke loose, and all was terror and screams; he chased the Arab ridden by our beautiful Miss Beamish, and would have torn them limb from limb, but a young mister rode between, and accepted the rage of the wild beast, who knocked him and horse into a pitch dark nullah, and there devoured them. The young man saved the lady's life, and was taken up dead,—but breathing. His name is G. Mallender, and it is said, that he comes from England."

CHAPTER XXVII

The Bonagherry estate, to which Mallender was transported, stood at the head of a slope, overlooking an open park-like distance; immediately round the long low house was a garden full of English flowers, roses, mignonette, violets,—subsequently extending into mere vegetables, such as lettuce, artichokes and tomatoes; further back, were the stables, drying grounds, coolie lines, and the premises were invested on all sides by coffee. It was October; a busy time for planters, and almost wherever the eye rested were dark brown coolies picking the crop. Mallender, luxuriously reclining in a long chair in the verandah, enjoyed the animated scene, and abandoned himself to his environment; a cool sea breeze coming over the Western Ghauts, the perfume of familiar flowers seemed to whisper of renewed vitality and the joy of living.

He had now been a week at Bonagherry, and felt better, and could creep up and down the verandah with the aid of a stick.

The injury to his head occasionally clouded his brain, —and at times he suffered agony; but things were coming back by degrees, and though his mind sometimes dwelt on home, and his prospective voyage, he seemed to have no bodily or mental energy. He was content to sit in the sun, imbibing thin, delicious air, waited on by his kind, sympathetic friends, Jessie and Tom, as well as the invaluable Anthony.

Tom was engaged all day, from the time the "ginty" or horn sounded to summon the coolies, till long after sundown, when he would come into the verandah, and cast his weary frame into a chair, and tell the invalid of his doings.

"It will be a good crop," he answered, in reply to Mallender's questions, "the picking goes well, but coffee isn't what it was—worth a hundred pounds a ton.

Now we are lucky if we get fifty—Brazil is ruining us, and we have ninety miles' carting to do, before we get the rail. Of course I have the old man at my back, but I must say I like to make; and anyhow it's a free life."

"All work, and no play?" suggested his guest.

"No, not always; there's still some shooting, and lots of good fellows within a ride. We generally have tennis on Sunday."

"No parson?"

"Lord love you, no! Our little cemetery is not even consecrated; however, people don't die up here, the climate holds them. As soon as you are fit, I'll take you round the neighbours. My nearest is a woman."

"A woman! What's she doing on a coffee estate?"

"Running a big plantation for all it's worth,—and working like a Trojan. I'm her adviser. Her husband, Major Bourne, died four years ago, a good, unpractical, easy-going Army man, and left her with a heavily-mortgaged property, two boys, and not a penny."

"By Jove!"

"Well, she faced the situation, sold off her jewellery, piano, and ponies, and started to make the place pay. She bought cows, and supplies good butter, she set up a bakery, and makes bread and cakes; knits socks, and sells them, and has lots of custom. I never saw a more determined or hardworking creature. Now the boys are at school; some mortgages are paid off; she has engaged a lady help, and is going ahead like steam. It was rather expected she'd marry again, but she's not that sort—her mind is dead set on Harvey and Jim."

A week later, on a Sunday afternoon, Tom drove his friend over to Kartairi to call on Mrs. Bourne, who being a popular and influential lady, received the whole countryside on that day. The verandah was crowded with visitors; nearly all planters, and nearly all talking shop or sport,—whilst the hostess dispensed tea, and her celebrated hot cakes. Most of the assembled com-

pany looked forward to "Mrs. B.'s Sundays." Here they met their fellows and had tennis; here they were sure of a warm welcome, of sympathy, or a little doctoring, or even a little advice, if required. To many an exile, Kartairi represented a sort of local home.

Mallender was duly presented to Mrs. Bourne; a lady of forty with a slim figure, a pair of very bright brown eyes, and a firm chin. She wore a well-fitting white lace blouse, a black skirt, and an air of inexhaustible energy and will power.

The hostess was inclined, as it is expressed, to "make a fuss," with the invalid; to get an arm-chair, and cushions, and place him near herself; but the guest declined her good offices rather brusquely, and backed away into the outer circle of the company,—where amid inquisitive glances he found a seat, and a retreat.

"Best leave him alone," growled Tom, "he is all abroad still, and hates talking," and with a regretful glance at the distant figure so conspicuously aloof, she nodded in assent.

Mallender's head ached with sharp stabbing pains, the recent jolting in the bamboo cart was no doubt the cause of this; he felt ill and slack, and all this coffee-planter talk bored him to death. As he sat morosely apart—thinking that it would be better he were dead than a helpless log, and a burden to himself and his friends, someone came through a door beside him, carrying two plates piled with cake; he looked up, and was surprised to recognise Barbie Miller! Such a smiling Barbie, with a brilliant complexion and happy eyes.

She passed on her errand, and presently in answer to a whisper from Mrs. Bourne, approached Mallender with a cup of tea. He was so shockingly altered, that she could hardly believe that this was the same gay and good-looking young officer whom she had known six months previously.

His head had been shaven, his face was drawn and colourless, his once merry eyes looked lustreless; they had a strained expression, and were sunken in deep

hollows. As she put out her hand, he gazed at her listlessly.

"How do you do, Captain Mallender, I hope you remember me?"

"Er—yes—I think so," he answered uncertainly, "in—in Madras, was it? You rode the chestnut polo pony"; he made no attempt to take her hand, nevertheless she drew up a chair, and sat down beside him.

"Where is he?" he asked, after a silence, during which, as she surveyed him, the girl told herself that Death on the pale horse was swiftly approaching her companion! poor, poor fellow! and her eyes suddenly filled with unexpected tears.

"Where is he?" he persisted. "What have you done with him—the old buffer with the fat neck?"

"I don't know who you are talking about," she answered, softly. "If it is my father, he died—he——"

"No, no," he interrupted, peevishly, "I mean the other—the one you married?"

"But I'm not married," she answered, colouring.

"So I see you and Miss Miller are old friends," said Tom, now joining the little party, and drawing up a chair.

"Oh, I don't know about—*friends*," rejoined Mallender, with rude significance. "I say, old chap, can you get me out of this? I can't stand all this jabbering and jaw!" and totally ignoring the existence of Barbie, he rose unsteadily to his feet, and stumbled down the steps.

"Don't mind him, his head is all wrong still," whispered Tom, "come over as soon as you can, and help us to cheer him a bit. Jessie has been expecting you every day."

"Yes, I know, but it's been such a heavy week with the butter, sixty pounds," throwing out her pretty hands. "I'll come the first spare hour. Hurry, hurry—don't let him drive!" indicating Mallender, who was already in the tum-tum, and had taken up the reins; and Tom justly alarmed instantly dashed out of the verandah and scrambled headlong into the cart.

Three days later, Mrs. Bourne and her lady help rode over to Bonagherry, and found Jessie and the invalid on the verandah. He looked better, and actually went down to assist the ladies from their ponies. Subsequently he made himself useful at the tea-table in handing cups and cakes. Apparently he had recovered his poise, and his manners!

After tea, Jessie took Mrs. Bourne away to consult with her about a sick calf, and Mallender and Barbie were left alone.

"I'm sure I owe you an apology, Miss Miller," he suddenly began. "I've a sort of blurred idea, that I was extraordinarily rude to you on Sunday. You see, I have had a knock on the head—like what you had the time the old Nizam came down with you, and at times I am a bit foggy."

"I quite understand. Don't think of it, please!"

"But I must. I've thought of it a good deal; on Sunday the drive upset my blessed head, and I hardly knew where I was, or what I was doing."

"Then is the pain so bad?"

"Awful, sometimes; but don't let on to the Beamishes."

"Why not? Oh, I believe I can guess. I've heard how you saved Tara from a terrible death."

"No, not death, you see *I* am still here,—and of course it had to be one of us. Tara is so young and pretty, and all her people so fond of her, and no one would miss *me*. She's engaged to be married too."

"I know, and as for Archie Murray, he can't speak of it without choking."

"The engagement?"

"How can you joke? You know perfectly well what I mean, he is longing to come over to thank you."

"Miss Miller, as you love me!—no—I—I—whatever you do, don't let him. I hate thanks, if he comes I'll have another relapse! He'd have done just the same, if he was in my place."

"Very well, then, I'll do my best to protect you from

Archie Murray, but it won't be easy! Have you heard from the Tallboys lately?"

"No, not for ages. I'm sorry to say I'm in Fred's black books; and that reminds me to ask, what I had done to be posted in yours, during the latter end of my stay in Madras?"

He paused for a reply, but none came. Miss Miller had become brilliantly pink, and was looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Come now," he continued, "if I was rude to you the other day, I had some excuse,—but I shall be glad to hear what you have to say for cutting me dead, over and over again?"

"I—I don't know *how* I'm to tell you," she began, speaking very fast. "I believed I had a good reason, and—later, I found out, that I had been misinformed. I was very sorry, and ashamed—too; but you had left Madras, and so I could not apologise. May I apologise now?"

"If I had some idea of what you were apologising for."

"Oh, it was a wicked, unfounded, cruel scandal, and Ada has written to me, and told me all you did for her,—and that was your reward!"

"They say virtue is its own reward," he answered, with a smile. "I have been out of society, and heard no gossip, and I can't for the life of me see how there could be any scandal about Miss Sim and myself. Well, anyway, it's all right now, you and I have put matters straight between us. How do you come to be in these parts?"

"Father and mother went home last March, and—and——" suddenly her voice seemed to fail her.

"So you did *not* marry Colonel Harris?"

"No, I simply couldn't! I screwed up my courage, and told him so, one day when mother sent us to look at a bungalow. At first, he was incredulous, then shocked, finally—as I was determined, furious;—so was mother. Within an hour she packed up my clothes, and sent me off in a *gharry* to the chaplain's wife in the

Fort, with a letter to ask her to get me into some charitable institution, as my parents disowned me. I believe there were other dreadful things in the letter. Father was kinder, he came to see me and say good-bye, and gave me a little money, and told me to write to him at home to care of Grindlay and Co.—and said, 'this is none of *my* doing, Barbie—but your mother is too strong for us!'"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Mallender; "strong is not the word——"

"Poor father, he died of heat apoplexy in the Red Sea. Of course, Mrs. Tallboys came to my rescue, and found me this happy home. I've not many friends out here, but those I have, are *splendid!*"

"I have not many either. Look here, Miss Miller, shall you and I be pals? What do you say?"

"Yes," she answered, simply. This poor haggard fellow would not long be in need of pals.

"Then give me your hand on that!" he said, eagerly.

She gave it, and he was still holding it with an emphatic and lingering clasp, as Mrs. Bourne and Jessie re-entered the verandah.

"Miss Miller and I have been squaring up old scores," announced Mallender, "signing a treaty of peace; for in Madras, we were dead cuts, and now we intend to be allies."

Later that same evening, when Tom and Jessie compared notes, they agreed, that the visit from Kartairi had wakened up Geoffrey in a surprising way, and done him a world of good!

CHAPTER XXVIII

A WHOLE month had elapsed since his arrival at Bonagherry, and the invalid was now convalescent. He walked and rode about the estate with Tom, was unaffectedly interested in the crop, and its prospects, and wildly excited, when a panther took the "writer's" cow,—almost from under his roof! Vainly did he beg,

pray, and argue for a stalk. This was inflexibly denied him, but he was permitted to visit, and mark, the well-known and respected "track" that like a glorified "cat's run" passed right through the estate.

The idler saw to the feeding and exercise of the pack of nondescript dogs,—such as are kept on most coffee plantations—generally the abandoned pets of people who have left the Hills and departed to England. Among this mixed multitude was a brown retriever, a respectable Aberdeen, a self-conscious pug, a Scotch deer-hound, a beagle, several terriers, and various hounds of low degree. The pug and the Aberdeen were adopted by Jessie, but the remainder of the pack were frequently summoned to hunt wild pig or sambur, in the thickest of adjacent sholahs.

Every Sunday the Bonagherry party went over to Kartairi, where Tom and Jessie were conspicuous and victorious at tennis, whilst Mallender sat and applauded, and talked to Mrs. Bourne, who was also a looker-on. He liked her; the popular enterprising widow, had a wonderful power of drawing out the best that was in a man, and offering her help and sympathy. She had learned from Tom, that his friend was returning to England as soon as he was fit; that he had come to India, on some sort of forlorn hope, and signally failed in finding what he sought; and thanks to his recklessness, had lost friends, health, and fortune.

To her guest Mrs. Bourne intimated that she was *au courant* with the outline of his little history, and was kind and comforting after her own elder-sister fashion.

"Yes, this time last year you would not have known me!" he said, "I was as strong as a horse, and fairly well off. Now, I am horribly poor and look like some sickly, broken-down loafer, and—it's more or less my own doing!"

"Nonsense," she answered, "your accident has made you take gloomy views of yourself; in another month you will be all right;—this air has worked wonders, and if you really are hard up, why not start coffee?"

"Yes, as a creeper?" and he laughed, "that's what you call a beginner, don't you? Well, I'll think of it, Mrs. Bourne. I must say, I like an open-air life, and Tom will shove me along. I might do worse."

To which she replied, "If you ask me, I don't think you can do better. Coffee has been *my* friend!"

* * * * * *

About this time, Anthony came to his master with a grave, portentous air, and said:

"I beg your pardon, saar, that Chinna-Sawmy boy no use here, and doing no good."

"Oh, yes, he helps Miss Beamish, she likes him; he's a smart little chap. I like him too."

"Still better go," rejoined Anthony, unmoved.

"Why?"

"No luck bringing. Master never catching Uncle. Master near losing life. Master no money got."

"But that's not Sawmy's fault, poor beggar!"

"I beg your pardon, saar, better he go, nothing doing here, but feed chickens, make dog food, and such like fool work—Master poor man."

"Six rupees a month won't break me; but does Chinna-Sawmy wish to retire?"

"As Master pleases," then after a pause, "Yes, so I think—Sawmy has one uncle, who is maistrey on coffee estate; that man Mootosawmy plenty money got, and he calling for Chinna-Sawmy."

"Well, I shall soon be going to England, and if Sawmy thinks he can better himself, send him here."

Presently Chinna-Sawmy appeared, all glittering eyes and white teeth.

"So you wish to take leave, Sawmy?"

"No, saar, I spending every day, *always* with Master, —only that boy Anthony, he say 'Better go.'"

"Oh, he is your patron, I know. You've been a good little chap, and I want to give you a present."

Chinna-Sawmy's attitude stiffened.

"What would you like?"

A long and thoughtful pause ensued—during which Chinna-Sawmy twisted his toes, with incredible flexibility.

"May I tell the plain truth?" he asked at last.

"Of course, what else?"

"Then Master please, I taking camera!"

Here was a most unexpected request! Mallender had visions of making a donation of ten rupees, or an old, but useful silver watch. The camera, bought in extravagant days, had cost ten pounds. Well, after all, he would not want it again. No need to lug the thing to England. Chinna-Sawmy was an expert now (the extra thumbs were surprisingly useful) and could make his livelihood as a photographer. The camera would represent his fortune; and the boy had been wonderfully attentive in illness; lying outside his door ready for a call, day or night.

"All right, Chinna-Sawmy," he said, "it is yours."

Then Chinna-Sawmy straightway fell down upon his knees, and kissed his master's boots.

A week later, Mallender received the amazing intelligence from Anthony.

"That Chinna-Sawmy boy done get married! Plenty good business—camera catching wife!"

"Why, what nonsense!" protested his master with a laugh, "he is only a child! Has he been kidnapped?"

"He is sixteen, saar, very small size; the girl, she is four years old, Hindoo low caste. Chinna-Sawmy's rich uncle, he this marriage making, and plenty big feast, and fireworks giving."

Two days later, the bridegroom appeared, to make his obeisance and acknowledgments to his late employer, and the Beamish household. He looked (a surprising experience) almost shamefaced, as he rode up on a lean cow-hocked pony, with a profusion of yellow garlands round his neck, accompanied by a large cortège, and a band, so to speak, of tom-toms. After an interchange of compliments and good wishes, with gifts of fruit, cigarettes, and sweets, Chinna-Sawmy and suite were dis-

missed from the scene, in order to carouse, generally make merry, dance and gamble, in the servants' go-downs.

It has been mooted that Chinna-Sawmy has recently set up a little studio in Georgetown, Madras, under the name of "Charley Sammy, British Photographer from Oxford Street, London." May he prosper! Anthony, however, is sore displeased (and perhaps a little jealous), and quotes a native proverb, to the effect that "the higher the monkey climbs, the more he shows his tail!"

Early one delicious dewy morning, Mallender was awoke by noises, and an unusual bustle in the verandah; he hastily threw on some clothes, and looked out. There was Tom, reading a letter, and Jessie in her flannel dressing-gown, sitting on the steps, crying in short convulsive sobs, whilst a coolie stood stolidly aloof. He was a messenger sent on foot from Wellunga, to inform his children that the General was dead.

"Well," exclaimed Tom, "the old man is gone at last!—found in his chair, where he always liked to sit, facing west. They thought he was asleep, and did not disturb him."

"I am very sorry," said Mallender.

"We must leave at once, Jess and I. I'll have a lot to see to, my mother is broken up, and there's only Tara,—who is no good in a crisis."

"It will make a tremendous change at Wellunga?"

"Yes; everything will tumble to pieces now; and the people will have their will at last! My mother must come and live up here, and the old place will stand empty. I say, Jess," to his sister, "you must take a pull at yourself. Hurry up and have breakfast, and pack. If we start soon we get down to-night, coolies and ponies were ordered by the runner, and oh—about you, Mallender, you can't stop here alone!"

"Why not! Of course I can. I'm not a nervous young lady. I'll be your overseer, understudy, and general bottle-washer!"

"No, no, you'd never have the right food, or care.

You must go over to Kartairi, and stay with Mrs. Bourne."

"Pretty cool cheek, she'd think it!"

"Not she—nothing she likes better, than nursing and mothering sick fellows. I'll send her a line by the garden coolie."

His guest immediately made a mental note to the effect that *no* messenger should go to Kartairi that day; fancy allowing himself to be foisted on two women!—and he craftily turned the conversation, by asking for employment, and instructions.

"I'm rather a duffer," he concluded, "but I can keep an eye on things, and overawe the slackers."

"Yes; there will be lots for you to do," answered Tom. "You have a good head for figures, and you can make up the writer's books, do the roll-call, ride over the estate, look stern and important, and give the maistrey reason to believe that you are up to every mortal dodge!"

"Which I'm not!" protested Mallender, "I hardly know chick coffee from the real article. However, I'll poke about, and look after the picking, and the pulping-house, and do my best and 'bluff' like auction bridge."

"Right you are! Mind that the children that do the ground picking get one pice a seer, and now I must go and put my traps together," concluded Tom, who seized this opportunity to scribble a chit to Mrs. Bourne, and expedited matters so successfully, that by eight o'clock, he and his sister were ready to start. They took leave of their guest in a duet of injunctions, with respect to his health. How he was not to ride too far, or expose himself to sun, or rain, and assuring him of their return within a week; then one in a chair, and the other on a pony, they took their way down the long winding ghât road, which led to the plains.

After breakfast Mallender, now "monarch of all he surveyed," visited the dogs, inspected the cattle, and held a solemn conference with the head maistrey. In the afternoon, he invested his head in a monstrous pith

topee, and rode about the estate; it was four o'clock, when he returned to the bungalow for a tub and tea, but to his amazement, neither were forthcoming; he found instead, a little note from Mrs. Bourne, which said:

"Your luggage and servant are awaiting you at Kartairi. Tea is at 4.30. Yours sincerely, Emily Bourne."

"Well, if this does not take the entire biscuit! Of all the cool proceedings!" muttered Geoffrey, as he re-read the chit, and scratched his head.

"I suppose there's nothing else for it. The bedding is gone, I must stick to my sponge, and razors," and he followed them to Kartairi.

"I'm afraid, you think me a most arbitrary lady," said Mrs. Bourne, as she welcomed her guest, "but I was so afraid you'd make excuses, and entrench yourself alone at Bonagherry, that I sent over, and *raided* your room!"

"Awfully kind of you," he murmured.

"I daresay you are awfully vexed, but you really are not yet out of the wood. Barbie and I will look after you, and you will find we are not *too* bad to live with. Your bath is prepared, and tea will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

The Beamishes were absent not for one, but three weeks, and during the time, their late inmate found himself agreeably at home at Kartairi. The house was run on more English lines than Bonagherry. A certain amount of admirable cooking was accomplished at a little oil-stove in the back verandah, lights in bedrooms were not the old oil and wick in tumblers, but neat hand lamps. Those in the drawing-room wore pretty silk shades, and the effect was eminently restful. Here flowers abounded, there were luxurious, chintz-covered chairs, a piano, many sketches and photographs, and an ample supply of books and magazines.

As an officer's wife, Mrs. Bourne had visited various countries, and picked up a number of little portable treasures; she had taste too, and a marvellous knack of making any home comfortable, and refined. As the

handsome, accomplished daughter of well-born people, it had been expected, that Emily La Haye (whose French ancestor had taken San Thomé) would contract a brilliant marriage; but to the disappointment of her parents, she "threw herself away" on a good-looking Captain in a line regiment,—an unpractical, extravagant, but popular fellow, who had no money sense whatever; and here she was left with two boys, and a pension of seventy pounds a year, struggling to make a living out of a coffee estate in Southern India.

Her connections figuratively lifted up their voices, and wept, when they talked of "Poor Emmie," and agreed, that she had made an awful mess of her life, and had become very proud, and independent. Nevertheless they posted her *The Queen*, and the *Weekly Times* with affectionate regularity, and welcomed her boys for their holidays.

Mrs. Bourne's tastes did not take the form of cake and butter-making,—nor even of knitting stockings, and superintending coffee picking. She was naturally artistic, and fond of music, and books, she even wrote a little—and occasionally a bright and amusing article signed by "Chick" appeared in the Indian journals; and now that Barbie Miller was her assistant, the busy lady enjoyed some leisure for her favourite pursuits. Barbie had no responsibilities connected with coffee, but undertook the house-keeping, butter, cakes, and poultry,—such an able energetic little creature, a delightful companion, with a sweet unselfish character, and a sunny face. Into this modest *ménage* a third had unexpectedly entered; to do him justice, Mallender gave no trouble; on the contrary, his servant Anthony was a valuable acquisition; a priceless treasure! He could make delicious coffee, carpenter, wait at table, paper a room, and sew!

Anthony's master spent most of the day over at Bonagherry, reappearing in time for tea, so that that crushing incubus, "an idle man in the house," was spared the two ladies. He assisted Mrs. Bourne too,

undertook certain business interviews—in which a man was secretly respected, and a woman set at nought! He overlooked accounts,—for Emily Bourne like many artistic people, had no head for figures,—and set an excellent example of energy and early rising. Mallender enjoyed this life amazingly. Open-air employment, the consciousness of having put in a good day's work, and of being worth his salt, afforded him a certain amount of satisfaction, and self-approval.

In the evening, the busy workers were at liberty for rest and enjoyment. They sat together in the charming sitting-room, and occupied themselves with music, books, poker, patience, and mere conversation. Sometimes Mallender read aloud, whilst the ladies worked; and as he now and then stole a glance over his book at his companions,—both so daintily dressed, so busy, and so interested, and in the case of one, so young and lovely,—he assured himself, that for the first time for years and years, he felt absolutely happy, and at home!

But he was not by any means so happy, when the several admirers of Miss Miller presented themselves upon the scene; riding over on Sunday, or casually dropping in to tea. There were several *prétendants* —(poor Tom Beamish had been among the crowd, but had confided to his friend, that as he knew Miss Barbie would never look at him, though he had lots of money, and would worship her all his life; he gave up, and retired). The individual Mallender most disliked and feared, was a man of the name of MacKenzie, known as "Mack," who owned a fine and flourishing estate, had a worn, handsome face, and looked romantic! He was about thirty-five years of age, and a person of substance, and standing, among other planters. Anyone could see with half an eye, that Mack was head over ears in love with little Miss Miller. So alas! was Mallender—there was no mistake about the fact. He was aware that a new phase in his life had opened, and felt strangely stirred. Little fair-haired Barbie, had enthralled him; he had been her slave, ever since the day at Bonagherry,

when she had given him her hand, and promise ; and each hour, but served to rivet his chains. Chains he was compelled to hug in secret, he dared not declare himself ; a fellow without a roof to offer, or a penny in his pocket—that is to say beyond his passage-money to England. As soon as he had returned home, and looked into matters, and found out exactly where he stood, he would come straight out, and ask her to marry him.—Meanwhile, what of *Mack ?*

Another obstacle, was his own invincible reluctance to move, although now strong and well, thanks to these Hills, and their clear vitalizing air ; he could not bring himself to leave them—how tear himself away ? Nevertheless go he must, and he assured himself, that he was in honour bound to depart, and make no sign.

And Barbie—did she guess ? how could she ? He laughed and chaffed with her, joined in duets, to Mrs. Bourne's accompaniment, rode, played tennis, and card games, just as if she was nothing at all to him—instead of being everything in the world. As for Barbie ? The busy young lady, no longer under the blight of her mother's rule, found herself most unaccountably happy, and asked no more. Possibly the cause of her happiness, was not far to seek ;—but she had no idea of making a search,—possibly she had a feeling, that if she looked too closely into her possession, the enchanting vision might fade and disappear, like some beautiful mirage of the desert.

As for Mrs. Bourne, she calmly and dispassionately surveyed the situation, with the eye of sympathy and experience. She had long guessed Mallender's secret,—naturally a simple affair to such a clever woman. She liked Geoffrey ; in fact, liked him so much, that she hoped her own boys would be of the same stuff ; thoughtful for others, modest, and manly, and he had such nice frank eyes ! What a pity, this wild scheme had ruined him ! She took upon herself to scold him roundly for his obstinacy, and optimism, and concluded an animated lecture by saying :

"After your interview with Brown and Co., you should have turned straight round, and taken the first steamer for England."

"Then I should never have come to Mysore and met you, Mrs. Bourne," he answered gaily. "However, better late than never; as soon as the Beamishes return, I'll hand over, and be off to see what I can scrape together! Precious little, I'm afraid; for I've sunk my own money in what is my Uncle's property; repairs to the house, and to some of the farms, have swallowed up almost all I possess. Well, whatever I can pick up, I'll bring back here, buy a little estate, and start as a planter."

"Will you—I wonder?" murmured Mrs. Bourne looking at him meditatively. To herself, she said, "If he returns, and finds Barbie married to Lewis MacKenzie, he won't remain twenty-four hours!"

CHAPTER XXIX

Two or three times a week, Mrs. Bourne and her young friends mounted their ponies, and went for extensive excursions in the neighbourhood. Mallender rode a stout brown cobby animal from Bonagherry, known as "The Duffer," the lady of Kartairi, a well-bred chestnut who had played polo, and Barbie, a wiry flea-bitten grey, whose propensity for thieving, and agility in climbing, had earned for her the name of "The Cat." Kartairi stood amid what might be termed a sea of coffee bushes, extending for many acres; at first, the little party were obliged to ride along the narrow coolie tracks in Indian file; they had also to pass through that deplorable spectacle, an abandoned estate. Here the land was overrun with a climbing prickly plant, the desolate bungalow was dismantled, and the pulping-house a ruin—all this, to the credit of the planter's deadly enemy the "Borer" Worm.

Emerging at last from among lucent green bushes, the riders came by degrees upon grassy uplands, and the great silent spaces, which are bounded by the Western

Ghauts. Here were glades, downs, and clumps of trees recalling English parks; and in the cool clear air, the little party enjoyed many a delightful and invigorating gallop.

Once the riders made their way into another country, and a warm and steamy climate; descending by break-neck paths, and wet sedgy glades, dropping cautiously from terrace to terrace into the rich forest lands above Canara, and avoiding with care "the special reserve"—a peculiar feature of the West; sacred groves dedicated to the ancestral gods, into which the foot of shikari, woodman or herdsman may not penetrate. The ancestral gods are supposed to hunt in these regions, and woe betide the luckless mortal who encounters them! Owing to the rainfall, the extraordinarily luxuriant growth in this part of the world must be seen to be realised. Bamboos of enormous size, great teak trees, with their glossy leaves, gigantic plantains, sandal wood, and the sago palm, flourish here in wildest profusion. As for flowers, the riders found themselves in a fairy garden, amid a wealth of blooms and perfumes, undreamt of in colder climes; their ponies' hoofs ruthlessly trampled on lilies, begonias, orchids, and maiden hair, and pressing along the narrow game tracks, thrust themselves between masses of convolvuli, and sweet flowering shrubs. In the warm scented atmosphere the perfume of the "Niddo" was almost overpowering.

From several directions the most promising vistas were unapproachable, owing to the density of the thorny undergrowth, and tangled ropes of the flame-coloured "Elephant Creeper," that so to speak held the trees of the forest in a bondage of flowers.

"The old Portuguese were well acquainted with this part of the world," remarked Mrs. Bourne, as she halted to feast her eyes on a riot of contrasting colours.

"No wonder they called it 'The Gorgeous East.'"

"No wonder, indeed!" assented Mallender.

"This paradise, however, has its serpent," she continued. "I don't allude to the cobras among the bam-

boos, nor even the tiger, and leopards, that abound in the reserves,—but the terror of these forests, is—the *leech!*"

"I'd much sooner face thousands of leeches, than one leopard," declared Barbie.

"Yes, so would I; but you have no idea how those abominations can drain the lives of man and beast—there are half a dozen on The Cat's legs, at this moment!"

Mallender instantly sprang off, to the rescue of The Cat.

"The only method is this," said the provident matron, handing him as she spoke a little parcel of salt, "I always carry it, when I come down into these regions, and I never remain long. I only wish we could; for of an evening, the fire-flies are a wonder to behold, their illuminations, incredibly magnificent—but we must be going."

"I think, I'd trust the fire-flies to my imagination," said Barbie, "although this is the most marvellous, dreamland, sort of place I've ever seen!"

"Yes, a real tropical forest; and the vegetation is even more dense and splendid in the reserves."

"How I should like to have a day's shooting in one of them," said Geoffrey, "I daresay I'd get a brace of tiger, an elephant, and a bison."

"You'd also get into frightful trouble with the Government; even supposing the wild beasts let you off! The sacred groves *are* sacred!"

"It makes one think of the Old Testament," said Barbie, "of Baal, and sacrifices, groves, and high places."

"Yes, and they are held in the same superstitious veneration. A small portion of Lewis MacKenzie's estate encroaches on one of these holy places called 'Devera-Rudu,' and he has to pay a heavy indemnity. I believe there is no doubt, that not so very long ago these groves were the scenes of human sacrifices—even now, it is whispered that horrors take place in out-of-the-way holes and corners, under the cloak of fanaticism and secrecy."

"But what about the long arm of the law, and the police?" enquired Mallender.

"Oh, the police cannot have their eyes everywhere,

certainly not in the depths of almost impenetrable forests. Some of these sacrifices are mistaken for murder, or even suicide; of course, I *may* be wrong, and these reserves, spotlessly innocent of anything worse than incantations, devil worship, and black magic."

"I see you have a pretty bad opinion of them!" rejoined Mallender, with a cheerful laugh.

"They look harmless enough, and what a glorious show of forest trees and jungle. I only wish I could get a 'permit' to shoot and I'd face anything, from wild dogs, to black magic!"

Occasionally the riding party was augmented by one or two neighbours, and tiffin or tea was despatched to some favourite rendezvous.

On a certain lovely afternoon, arrangements were made for a meeting at a celebrated spot, known as "The Window in the West," there to admire the prospect, subsequently enjoy a cold repast, and ride home by the light of a full moon. The Window of the West was sixteen miles from Kartairi, through oceans of luxuriant coffee, deep valleys, and dense sholahs, by narrow winding paths, ending in a long precipitous ascent—and then the view!

"It is well worth while," declared Mrs. Bourne, "though I must confess, I have only twice made this excursion; it's such an abominably bad road. When you reach a certain point, you arrive at an abrupt break in the mountains and look sheer down upon the plains, stretching away to the Indian Ocean. Coming out of a tangle of high rocks, ravines, and jungle, this view of the sea—is so sudden and *unexpected*, that for a moment it takes your breath away! You feel positively startled, and as if it was a sight you had *never* seen before. Humboldt, the traveller, who visited many lands, considered the prospect from MacCourty's Peak, —which is similar to our 'Window'—the finest in all the Universe, and I believe he is right."

"But what of the Himalayas?" questioned Mallender, "and the glories of the snows?"

"Oh, yes, I know; I've seen them from Darjeeling—the 'Roof of the World.' They are mighty, majestic, and overwhelming; but so aloof, and frozen, you cannot approach within forty miles of their footstool—they are almost as inaccessible as the stars! Here in Old Madras, in the midst of our soft blue mountains, you enter upon a land of sun and enchantment, you take your stand upon a carpet of flowers, and gaze across tropical forests, and rolling plains, to the far-away glittering sea! I remember the first time *I* looked out of the 'Window,'—I actually cried. Perhaps because the ocean lying within view, drew my thoughts towards home, and England—perhaps, because I seemed to catch a glimpse of Heaven!"

In a steep zig-zag path resembling a dried water-course, Mrs. Bourne's pony cast a shoe. This was indeed a calamity, for Ibex had brittle hoofs, and had lost a fore shoe, such bad luck, and yet owing to this circumstance, the fate of Geoffrey and Barbie received a little push!

"It's a good two miles to the 'Window'—I dare not try it, unless I walk," said Mrs. Bourne, "the last bit is ghastly; so I'll just stop here, waylay the coolies, and make preparations for supper. I expect you will find Mr. Mack, and the Kennedys, and young Reekie, there before you. Of course, Barbie, you and Captain Mallender are to go on."

"What! and leave you here, all alone," objected Mallender, "certainly not."

"I'm not afraid; it's not the tiger season, and anyway, he'd take the pony first. Come, come, good people, don't waste time—the sun sets in half an hour."

"I intend to stay with you," said Barbie, "and we can take turns on The Cat, riding home."

"Be off at once, Barbie," urged her friend authoritatively, "you had better ride up as far as possible, and Captain Mallender can leave The Duffer here, with the syce; if you go now, you will just be in time for the sunset,—and see it sinking into the sea."

So Barbie departed, escorted by Mallender. It proved a rugged climb, through slippery mossy rocks, tree roots, and shale. At last, quite suddenly, they arrived at a space, and stood as it were at the open casement of some high castle.

Barbie had dismounted from her pony, and the two remained momentarily transfixed, gazing on the evergreen forests which clothed the long roll downwards, to the undulating teeming plains; steeped in all the glamour of the tropics, a world of absolute peace and plenty lay at their feet. Beyond the plains, shimmering in the sunset, shone the sea: over all, there was a peculiar quality, which is best described as radiance, and the scene, the atmosphere, and spirit of the ocean, seemed somehow to grip one's heart.

Mallender continued to gaze for a long time in silence. It was the girl who spoke first.

"How wonderful! how exquisite! It's like the setting of a fairy tale. It makes one feel——" she hesitated in search of an appropriate expression.

"And it makes one *think*," he supplemented.

"I believe I could guess your thoughts."

"Do, if you can," turning to her.

"As you looked at the sea, you felt a great, great, great longing to go home."

"I was watching that little black speck of a steamer, and I confess I'd like to go, for some reasons, in fact, I must go soon."

"Yes, and Mrs. Bourne has taken her passage for March, so as to be in time for the boys' Easter holidays."

"And you, Miss Miller?"

"Oh, as for me," striving to speak cheerfully, "I shall never see England again."

"But why not?"

"I have no home there; my mother has disowned me."

Mallender looked at Barbie the homeless; noticed her delicate profile, clear-cut against the sky, the sunlight catching the light in her loosened hair, the

little sad, wistful mouth, the tears on her eyelashes; looked and cast all prudence figuratively out of the "Window," and to the four winds!

It was true that she had no home, nor had he. Well, all the same, he would ask her to share his life.

"Look here, Miss Miller—Barbie——" he began impulsively, "suppose you come home with me—or—or—if you will wait, I'll return, and make you a home out here."

"But I," growing very red, "don't understand."

"Of course, as usual, I'm a blundering ass, I am asking you to marry me."

Barbie was conscious of the quick throbbing of her heart, and a minute of silence stretched itself out into what seemed to Mallender an interminable period. At last she said:

"You are not in earnest?"

"I swear I am, and in deadly earnest. Barbie, my little Barbie, you don't know how I love you; or how desperately hard I have found it to hold my tongue. I thought I ought to wait, till I'd some sort of home to offer you; but whether it is seeing the sea again, or seeing your tears, or what—I've *had* to speak!"

Here the uninterested "Cat," anxiously desiring to graze, and bored by this talk, wrenched herself violently away.

"Of course," chucking the animal's head, "I'm not much of a chap. I've made an awful muddle of my affairs, and I'm hideously poor. Just now, I've no money."

"But I like you so much better without it," was Barbie's startling declaration.

"Oh, come, that's encouraging, but why?"

"When you were rich, you never took any notice of me,—till the day you picked me up on the *maidan*. You were always a sort of lofty glorified individual, who was a favourite at Government House, barred girls, and——"

"But, I say," he interrupted, "what a frightful

accusation! I spotted you the very first night I dined at Fred's. You ask Nancy Brander; she told me you were engaged. That naturally put me off; and then afterwards, you know, you gave me the cold shoulder, didn't you?"

"Yes—I suppose I did," she admitted.

"And now," and he drew a long breath, "now I am asking you to give me yourself; it's a tall order, I know."

Barbie made no reply, but something more radiant than the afterglow flooded her soul, and filled her eyes with happy tears. From the first, she had felt irresistibly drawn to this young man, who stood before her bareheaded; and she asked no greater gift than that in him she might find a lover and a husband. Golden silence can be eloquent! Barbie's charming, expressive face spoke for her, and Mallender drew her unresisting towards him. Was anything in life comparable to the exquisite happiness of the moment, when her lips met his?

For an instant they stood hand in hand, and in expressive and rapturous silence. The whole thing was like a heavenly dream, from which however they were rudely aroused, by the sound of grumbling voices, scrambling feet, and scattering stones. In another moment Mr. MacKenzie and his young apprentice, Andrew Reekie (a merry-eyed Army failure, whose sunburnt face and violently red hair, had earned him the name of "the Blood Orange") were with them.

"So here you are!" gasped MacKenzie, as he took off his hat, and mopped his hot face, "by Jove, it's a stiff pull!—grand scene, though, grand!" as his eyes roved over the wonderful panorama, that fell from their feet; the teeming forests, the masses of palms, and thickets of bamboos. The sun was sinking into the west, and a rose and gold afterglow was reflected in the shining sea with indescribable effulgence.

"Yes," added MacKenzie when he had recovered his

breath, "this view would take a good bit of beating. I wish the 'Window' was in Scotland, I'd run the show for tourists, and make a fortune! Hullo, where's Mallender gone to?"

"I think, to catch my pony, she has strayed away," said Barbie.

"Strayed away," repeated MacKenzie. "I'm afraid you were not looking after her, Miss Miller, too much taken up with the view, eh?"

"Yes, I confess I forgot all about her," was her truthful answer, "but The Cat is such a cunning creature; she knows how to take care of herself. Ah, I see she has been captured," as Mallender emerged, triumphantly leading an aggrieved animal, with her mouth full of succulent green food.

"Perhaps we had better be moving," suggested MacKenzie, "Mrs. Bourne gave us three-quarters of an hour to get here, and back to supper, and I think we shall just about do it! Of course, you won't ride down, Miss Miller; it's bad going, like broken stairs—Mallender can look after The Cat, and I'll take care of *you*."

The cold supper in a dell, lit by the moon, proved a right merry meal; the syces and servants had made a big fire, boiled the kettle, and under Mrs. Bourne's directions, spread a substantial repast on a table-cloth on the moss. Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy arriving rather late, had shirked the last two miles, and kept her company. They were a cheery young Irish couple, who always made an affair go off.

As from afar they descried Barbie and her escort, in the van of the sight-seers, Mrs. Kennedy remarked:

"I'm thinking, you'll be having a wedding at Kartairi, before long, Mrs. Bourne."

"Do you say so—who?"

"Is it who? Why, little Miss Miller and Mack, to be sure! He is a rich man by all accounts, and you will have to be looking round for another lady-help."

"Faith, and Mrs. Bourne will look a long time,

before she comes across as pretty a girl as Barbie," said Mr. Kennedy, "the beauty of these Hills; her complexion would shame a rose!"

"I think you are both talking the greatest nonsense," declared Mrs. Bourne, who was busily cutting up cold roast guinea-fowl.

"Yes, Paddy is; it's his normal state," asserted his wife with a laugh, "I don't allow him to rave about other young women, and I shall give him six nice little strokes of my whip when I have him to myself at home—not that I don't agree with him about Barbie!"

The supper-party broke up about eight o'clock, and the revellers set out for the fourteen-mile ride. Mrs. Bourne mounted Geoffrey's pony, Ibex was led by a syce, and "The Blood Orange" and Geoffrey, took it in turns to ride the latter's hairy slave. Taking advantage of some discussion, argument, and the consequent delay, Mr. MacKenzie (always king of his company) led off with Barbie. He appeared to think, that owing to his standing and weight in the neighbourhood, he had an undisputed claim to the first place, and choice of partners.

Geoffrey looked after the pair, as they gradually disappeared into a steep valley. Well, it did not matter if Mack rode a few miles in the moonlight with Barbie,—though he sincerely wished himself in his place. Barbie was pledged to *him*.

The poor girl had a truly anxious and uncomfortable ride, and found extreme difficulty in warding off, and eluding, a second proposal within a couple of hours. Over and over again, the conversation became personal; and on each occasion, she called her woman's wit to her assistance, and guided the subject into generalities. Finally being at the end of her resources, the deceitful little creature pleaded such toothache, that she could not talk, and Mack more than ever in love, and impressed by her maidenly diffidence, reserved his declaration for a future occasion. How little he dreamt, that the girl's whole heart and thoughts were with the

man he had nicknamed "the loafer," who was leading a lame pony a mile or two in their rear.

Mrs. Bourne received from Barbie the surpassing news, almost before she had time to change from her habit,—and strange to say, exhibited no surprise whatever.

"I like him very much, dear," she said, as she embraced her, "and you will, I believe, both be happy. My little Barbie will make a capital wife for a poor man!"

For the next few evenings, there was more conversation than music; plans were exhaustively discussed, coffee estates, crops, and furniture took the place of the most thrilling news of the day. There was also a certain amount of sitting *tête-à-tête* in the verandah, overlooking the moon-flooded estate, whilst kind Mrs. Bourne, wrote letters indoors, and made detailed arrangements for a trip to Madras, and home. These were evenings of beautiful happenings, magnificent castle building, close sympathies, and the thrill of touching hands.

The air was pure and cool, the nights were so still, that the whole world seemed to be at rest, not a sound disturbed the deep silence, but two young voices.

"I think you are *very* brave, Barbie," said Mallender, "you know, we shall be paupers!"

"Yes, and Mrs. Bourne says I shall make a splendid wife for a pauper, I manage so economically, and keep down the ghee, and charcoal. The cook is quite *afraid* of me!"

Her fiancé burst into a derisive laugh. "As if any man, woman or child, would be afraid of *you*! I'll work tremendously hard, and take that little estate Tom recommends, and we will have a jolly life, keep a couple of ponies, lots of dogs, and run down to Bangalore in the slack time. How will that be?"

"Delightful. I see, you have thought it all out!"

"Why not? We have no one to please, but ourselves—you have no consent to ask for, nor have I.

Of course, I'll tell Fan and Fred. I know he adores you, partly I think—because you never gave Naughty Mary a sore back! You shall go and interview him, and melt his heart, and ask him to give you away?"

"If he were to see your scarred head, and thin sunken cheeks, that would be far more likely to touch him."

"Well, the Beamishes return in a few days, and I'll beard him when I go down to make arrangements for my run home. It will be awfully hard to leave you behind, Barbie."

"Yes; but I always think the one who is left has the worst of it!"

"No, no, no. However, hang it all, we are not going to grouse—three months will soon go by, and I shall be back before Mrs. Bourne starts, and take you over, Barbie, with *all* your liabilities."

These much-discussed plans of the young couple, were presently upset by a letter to Mallender, which said:

"Dear Sir,

"We are writing to request you to come to Madras immediately. If you can make it convenient to arrive by the mail at four o'clock on Tuesday next, the 11th inst., you will there be met by a messenger, and hear of something greatly to your advantage.

"We remain, dear Sir,

"Yours faithfully,

"Brown, Brown and Co."

"Just look at this!" said Mallender tossing it to Barbie, "the same old bait; but I'm not going to be had this time! I've been made a fool of too often, and you will not be surprised to hear, that I feel a pardonable misgiving. The burnt child dreads the fire!"

"But this is not from Jaffer," protested Barbie, "I see it is from Brown and Brown. I believe it is '*pucka*'

—and you are going to hear, or to see,—something at last ! "

" Not I ! "

" May I ? " and Mrs. Bourne extended a hand. After glancing at the note, she said :

" Barbie is right, I am sure this won't be an April Fool's errand. I think you will have to go."

" But if I do, I must start to-morrow ! " he protested.

" How I wish I might go too ! " said Barbie, " I feel certain, that something tremendous is about to happen."

" Something tremendous *will* happen, if you don't see to the churning, Barbie. I must get as much work out of you as I can, dear, as I'm afraid I won't have you this time next year ! "

" Next year ! " echoed Mallender, " not likely ! Long before that, Barbie will be making butter for *me*."

" And as for you, young man, you are to take the grey pony, and ride over to Sarma, and send a wire to say you arrive in Madras on Tuesday, without fail."

And in this imperious and high-handed fashion, Mrs. Bourne disposed of the happy couple in opposite directions.

CHAPTER XXX

It was growing dark as the train from Bangalore rolled into Madras Station, and the ceaseless moaning of the surf fell once more upon the ears of Mallender, who promptly descended from his carriage, and looked eagerly about him ; as he did so, he noticed the stately approach of a gorgeous peon, who with a deep salaam enquired :

" Is it Captain Mallender ? "

" Yes—all right."

" Then, please your honour, to come with me."

" What about my luggage ? " indicating bag and suit-case.

" That we will send to cloak-room."

" Evidently I am not expected to stay the night,"

thought the traveller, with amusement. When his baggage had been disposed of, he accompanied his guide, to where a fine closed motor was waiting to receive him ; as soon as he was seated the peon mounted beside the chauffeur, and they glided swiftly away. It was a magnificent car, evidently of great horse-power ! Mallender noted its luxurious and expensive equipment, as he leant back and lit a cigarette, with the air of a man who has not a care in the world !

" This," he said to himself, " is the rummiest thing, that has happened yet ! I'm in someone's two thousand guinea car, and I have not the faintest notion of who it belongs to,—or where I am going ? "

He was undoubtedly on the track of an adventure ; and this agreeable beginning, was much more auspicious than his various other openings.

Madras at this hour was crowded. The World had now descended from the Hills and Society was once more abroad. Many cars and carriages were flitting to and fro. Mallender noticed that he was not about to visit " fresh fields, and pastures new," but was being taken along a familiar road in the direction of Hooper's Gardens. Surely not there ? No—they swept smoothly by the entrance, and as they passed, he looked out, and noticed, that there were lights in the house. So the Tallboys were at home ! The next moment, the car came to a sudden stop, and then turned into a dark and densely overgrown drive ; in places, the crowding shrubs seemed to lash, and oppose the motor ; as it moved steadily forward, Mallender caught casual glimpses of a vast compound, and an impression of cattle, and tethered horses. The house, as they approached it, had an air of gloom and reserve, but when the car came to a standstill under the portico, he noticed a crowd of men, numerous as a Royal Body Guard, who were assembled in the lower verandah. Most of them were smoking and playing cards, but one was evidently doing " sentry go."

Undoubtedly this was the residence of some wealthy

native. Why, how stupid of him! how infernally stupid, not to recognise the premises of the relative of the Prince of Gulberga; that pungent atmosphere of green burning wood, huka smoke, and boiling grain, had frequently assailed his nostrils, when he occupied a tent in the neighbourhood.

The door of the car was flung open, as Mallender alighted the sentry presented arms, and he was invited to ascend to the verandah. A peon held a flaming lamp at the head of the marble stairs, where stood a tall slender woman, evidently awaiting him. She wore a richly embroidered satin *sari*, and massive gold ornaments. In this dress, the now experienced eye of the traveller recognised the costume of a high-born Coorg lady, or Princess.

As she turned, and the light fell on her face, he saw that she was no longer young, but still preserved the remains of astonishing beauty. The nose was delicate and clear-cut, the skin like ivory, the drooping lips, and dark tragic eyes, told a tale of sorrow,—yes, on the whole, here was the most striking personality that the young man had ever beheld.

"So you have come," she said, speaking English in a low full voice. "You will be very gentle and patient, will you not? Remember that your Uncle has not spoken to a kinsman, nor an English officer, for many years."

"So then my Uncle *is* here?" cried Mallender excitedly.

"Yes," she assented, "now you shall see him," and with wonderful grace, she glided out of the verandah, and across an antechamber, pushed open a door into a large dim apartment,—and there abandoned him.

Mallender stood for a moment gazing vaguely about. In size and shape the room was a counterpart of the familiar drawing-room next door (the houses were precisely alike) only there, was brilliant electric light in the French chandeliers,—here, on a table, two candles in old-fashioned shades merely made the darkness

visible. The room appeared to be almost entirely empty of furniture, and saturated with novel and aromatic odours; but as the visitor's eyes became accustomed to the twilight, he gradually made out some shadowy divans along the wall, a few rugs on the floor, and—he gave a slight start, as he discerned an arm-chair, and an outline of the spare stooping figure of a man in Europe dress. As he continued to stare, he noticed that he was wearing a black skull cap, a short black beard, and a pair of black-rimmed spectacles.

"You have arrived, Geoffrey Mallender!" said the figure in a harsh but muffled voice.

"Yes, I'm here," he answered boldly.

"Grope," continued the bearded man, "and you will find an arm-chair, draw it up to the table, and sit down."

Geoffrey obeyed without a word.

"So I have found you. You never found *me*," continued the mysterious individual, and he chuckled audibly.

"Do you mean to say that you are my Uncle?" enquired Mallender brusquely.

"I am."

"How am I to be sure of that? You see, I've been let in pretty often."

To this statement, a loud discordant laugh was the sole immediate response; after an appreciable pause, the bearded man added, "Ask me some questions, my doubting Thomas?"

"All right then. Tell me the address of our old town house?"

"Two hundred and ninety Bruton Street. Your father was born there."

"Good. Now the best fox cover at Opershaw?"

"Tylney Corner," was the prompt reply.

"And my grandmother's name?"

"Althea Chandos, she brought a beautiful foot into the family."

"Right, but perhaps you are a medium—or a clairvoyant or something."

"No—nor a tom-fool," he answered, "I am your Uncle Geoffrey."

Something in the accent—was it a faint resemblance to his father's voice?—carried conviction, and there came to Mallender, a keen sense of the importance of this revelation and interview.

"Now we are together," resumed his Uncle, "I may as well inform you, that you have provided me with an extraordinary amount of interest and amusement, during this last year."

"How was that?" asked his visitor sharply.

"*I* pulled all the strings, and you danced beautifully, my good puppet! I had Jaffer in my pay, and of course Shumilal his agent; it was I, who sent you on all those crazy excursions; for instance, to terrify Rochfort, and amuse old Beamish. I remember him thirty years ago: a splendid fellow even then. Poor chap, he still clings like a limpet to an outworn past. You see, I live behind the scenes; it is my rôle in every sense; I am a wire-puller. I have assisted at meetings. *I* was the writer who sat with his back to you in Shumilal's office, I was next door to you over the wall, when you stayed with Fred; I paid you a visit one night at Panjeverram. This sort of half-light existence, the life of a bat or an owl, is all that is left to me now."

He ceased to speak, evidently expecting his listener to make some remark, but Mallender remained dumb; he was furiously angry with his Uncle, and could not trust himself with words.

"I don't know how long I should have continued to amuse myself at your expense. I intended to pass you on next, to a miserable devil of a lunatic, who believes he has committed a murder, and has lived in hiding for years—but you were spared that, by a paragraph in a little local rag."

"Oh!"

"It mentioned that you had met with a frightful

accident, and were at the point of death; so then I realised that I had gone too far. I despatched a special messenger to Wellunga, tracked you to the Hills, and summoned you at last. I must confess, that the news of your accident gave me a shock. I sent the paper in next door—of course by post. I did not see why Fred should not have a bad shock too!"

Mallender made no reply, his heart was hot within him. So all the time he had been—as his Uncle declared,—a mere plaything, or puppet, who was made to dance for his amusement! Probably his companion was struck by his silence, and the judicial attitude of his young relative.

Leaning suddenly forward in his chair he said, "And now I am going to unveil the mystery; a mystery unexplained for a lifetime. Only for you, it would never have been cleared up,—and I confess, that your eagerness and determination to find either my murderer, or myself, has touched, and flattered me. There was a smack of romance about the whole thing! You have shown extraordinary pertinacity, and in spite of all sorts of obstacles, and many failures, have held on with the grip of a bulldog, or grim death. It's going to be a fairly long story, so if you smoke—I know you do—pull out the drawer in the table, and help yourself to cigarettes."

Geoffrey deliberately did as suggested, produced matches, struck one on the sole of his boot, and throwing himself back in his chair, prepared to listen to his Uncle's disclosure.

CHAPTER XXXI

"Of course, the old story, of how I disappeared in the hot weather of '81, is well known to you," began Captain Mallender senior, as he moved his chair a little nearer to his nephew. "We had capital sport in Coorg,—it's shot out now.—I was fond of exploring all over the place, when my lazy pals were lying on their backs, reading novels, and smoking. In this way, I happened on a

lady and her servants, who were in a bad fix; their bullock carriage got stuck in crossing a ford, and I came to their rescue. It turned out, that the lady was of the Royal house of Coorg, an Ikeri Princess; her name was Puvaka 'the flower sister.'—She has since been baptised Alida. The Princess was sixteen years of age, and amazingly beautiful; never had I seen such a face, and I fell madly in love with her, on the spot. The Princess Puvaka spoke a little English, I, a little Canarese, and well—I leave the details to your imagination. We had several moonlight meetings. I was absolutely infatuated, so, poor child, was she. I knew very well that her people would never consent to our marriage,—nor mine either, for that matter, but I threw such trifles to the winds! As for my family, my regiment, and my future, I never gave them a thought. Speaking dispassionately, and as an old man—there is no question, that such love, is undoubtedly a species of insanity! I decided to elope to Madras, there to get married, and see what turned up? I had money, she had astounding beauty. We were both young, and the world was before us! Our plans were on the point of maturing, when one moonlight night, we suddenly found ourselves betrayed, and surprised. Alida's infuriated kinsmen fell upon me like savages, I made a hard fight—but it was no good, one to fifty; when they had overpowered me and bound me fast, they cut off my nose, ears, eyelids, and upper lip. The Coorgs have a special instrument for this operation,—a sort of slicing knife called an 'Odu Katti.'"

Mallender had hastily risen to his feet, and in a strange hoarse voice exclaimed, "Good Lord, *now*—I understand!"

"Sit down—sit down!" snapped his Uncle. "Yes, death would have been far better; but the Coorg capital punishment,—trampling with elephants,—was not at the moment available. I was left mutilated, and all but dead. Alida escaped her brother's vengeance, they simply cast her off. She and her woman, and an old

man, carried me to a hiding-place, and with native herbs and oils, gradually healed my wounds; but I was, and am, a frightful and repulsive object; for theirs was no gentle operation, but a frenzied hacking, and hewing. Naturally, it was impossible for me to return, or ever again show my *face* in England! At first, when I realised all I had lost, I was determined to put an end to myself,—but Alida barred that way. She has been my good angel, a miracle of patience, and forbearance, has made me a home, cultivated the English language, and mitigated my life in death. We live here under a native name, for part of the year, and in the hot weather we go into camp out in Mysore, or to Bangalore, where I have a large house, near the Fort. Time, and money, have blunted the raw edge of my misery; I have my luxuries, shooting, horses, motors, yes! the rupees are a wonderful balm. I take a keen interest in native and European life, and am acquainted with many matters that are hidden from my countrymen, and I pull various strings for my country's good. I have had my eye on you, Geoffrey, my namesake. You take after me, and are bold, and enterprising—not like your father, who was dreamy and bookish, poor fellow, and naturally stagnant."

"But, you know, I came out here to look for you, by *his* wish."

"So I understood."

"He was full of remorse; because he had not answered your letter in person."

"To what good?" demanded his brother, with a touch of passion, "I was done for. I have paid the price of my folly; and yet Alida is a treasure. She endures my fits of depression, my irritable, exacting, temper. Sometimes I tell myself, that *her* fate has been the worst. We were married by a missionary,—since dead,—and she is your lawful Aunt, Alida Mallender. I know, you have a stout heart, nephew. Would you care to carry out your bold intention, and see me really face to face?"

" Yes," of course, was the confident answer. " Many a time, I have sat gazing at your picture in the dining-room at home."

" Ah, I'm glad I'll go down to posterity, as that good-looking young fellow. Now, you shall see the original," and Captain Mallender—late of the Blue Hussars—fumbled for a moment with spectacles and beard, then rose, and slowly advanced into the full light of the two candles.

Geoffrey braced himself, and rising from his place stood up to meet his ordeal.

He looked over at the man who confronted him across the table, yet in spite of strong nerves, and a certain amount of preparation, he gave a sharp involuntary cry. What he beheld, was a grey bent old man, wearing a black skull cap ; his withered cheeks were deeply sunken, his scanty beard, was white, and oh, the awful noseless face, the bare grinning teeth, the lidless eye-balls,—expressing mute agonised interrogation, and years of hopeless anguish.

The sweat stood out on Mallender's forehead, as his eyes were set in a fixed, and horror-stricken stare.

" You could not blame me for *hiding ?* " asked his Uncle thickly, " could you ? "

Mallender caught his breath in a sort of sob, and stammered :

" No."

Then the expatriated victim, turning his back, and resuming his disguise, once more seated himself, and there ensued an eloquent silence. Mallender the younger, was so severely and unexpectedly shaken, that for some moments he could not articulate ; he felt completely stunned, and incapable alike of speech or coherent thought. At last he said in a broken voice :

" Oh, Uncle Geoffrey, I can't express—what I feel for you ! "

" Thank you, my boy," came the answer in a husky tone, " now that you have had your wish, you understand, don't you ? "

"Yes, oh my God, I do!" responded his nephew.

"Few are acquainted with this horror—my fate," resumed Captain Mallender senior. "Some devoted Coorg dependents, screen us from the world, and their fellow-servants. I pose as a wealthy native who has made a fortune in tobacco, and am related to the old princely family of Gulberga, now, I may tell you, extinct."

"But isn't it impossible to personate a native?"

"Not at all. I had always a talent for languages, I speak Tamil, and Canarese like my mother tongue. I pretend, that I was educated in England—this accounts for my English tastes, my books, manner of riding, choice of food, and so on. I have an English sitting-room, with English arm-chairs, and lined with books, here and at Bangalore. It is looked upon as one of my numerous eccentricities. On the other hand, I smoke a huka, I maintain a royal reserve, and state; I give to the poor with both hands, and I tolerate at least a hundred parasites."

"And what of Brown and Brown? How much do *they* know?"

"They know everything," was the startling rejoinder. "Never withhold secrets from your men of business; and besides, in my case, they are necessary to manage my affairs, remit money, receive letters, and keep me in touch with England."

"Yes, I can see that, they did not give me much of a welcome—a pair of sun-dried old scorpions!"

"Don't be hard on them, Geoffrey. Your unexpected descent naturally put us out terribly. Probably you can now imagine how very uneasy you made me feel, until I discovered that your methods were childish."

"The whole thing was childish on my part."

"No, I won't allow that. I am more than thankful that you came. You have roused and shaken me out of a groove; to know, that a real live nephew, had so far exerted himself, as to come to India to find me! made me once more think of myself, as Geoffrey Mallender, and

not as the Nawab Dooloo of Idacotta. And now tell me something about yourself ?"

Geoffrey had not yet weathered the shock of his Uncle's history and its illustration ; in a few halting sentences he spoke of his upbringing, his having left the service, and his hitherto uneventful career.

"Well, out here, your career has been fairly eventful, thanks to *me*," said his Uncle. "I intend to make up to you, for your hardships. I expect you are in pretty low water with regard to money, eh, my boy ?"

"Yes, I am afraid so ; however, I have enough to take me home."

"You have. Brown and Co. have executed a deed in which Mallender is made over to you altogether. Of what use is it to a man like me ? it is now yours absolutely."

"But that would never do ! I could not accept it," protested Geoffrey, "what are you to live on ? If you will continue the allowance you made my father——"

"Don't worry about me," interrupted his Uncle, "I am not a poor man, even minus Mallender. For thirty years, my expenses have been moderate. I've no society to entertain, no clubs, no cards, no racers, no polo ponies. Like old Beamish, I have put by, and invested large sums, most of which will go to you after my death and Alida's. I've left some legacies to servants, and pensioners, and a trifle to Freddy ; what a stiff-necked little beggar it is !"

"Yes, but as far as I'm concerned, I don't blame him."

"Little does he guess, that *I* am his obnoxious next-door neighbour ! or how I like to hear him storming at me, for a nuisance, when we burn weeds and woods, and the wind is his way ; nor does he imagine, that I am often in Madras. I wear a pair of goggles, and sometimes drive my own car, and get about a good deal. I go to races, and cricket matches, I was at the polo, and witnessed your performance. When I appear in public, I wear a turban and beard, and sit well back in the car

like a 'Gosha' woman, so as to keep up my reputation, of an eccentric native gentleman of high degree. You ride well, Geoffrey, and I intend to give you a horse to take home; a splendid black Arab called 'Baber.' I shall like to think that he who has carried me out here, later on, will gallop round the old park, and the place where I was born."

"Surely something could be done for you, Uncle Geoffrey?" said Mallender. "Why not come home yourself? In these days, surgeons and science seem to work miracles."

"My good nephew! I now see that Fred has some ground for saying you have a strain of madness in your brain. I'm beyond human help. Here, I have dree'd my weird,—here I'll die. Supposing I were to accompany you home,—and my old heart leaps at the thought!—what do you think people would say? They'd swear I was a rank impostor. Mallender of the Blue Hussars, was drowned years and years ago."

"But you could do the same as out here, take another name?" urged Geoffrey the persistent.

"Always optimistic, and full of schemes, I see! No, no, the Nawab will bide in Madras."

Then rising from his place he came nearer, a strange but not horrifying object, with false nose and beard, the eyeballs looking out from the black-rimmed glasses wore a soft expression as he said:

"You must make it up with Fred, tell him, you've carried out your project and seen me, are reinstated, and sole owner of Mallender,—park, property, house, and its contents down to the very teaspoons!"

"But listen to me, Uncle Geoffrey. I really cannot take it all like that, in your lifetime."

"You can, in short, there's no help for it. Mallender is yours now, as much as the coat on your back."

The new owner of Mallender was about to expostulate, but his Uncle held up his hand.

"To let you into a secret, Geoffrey—I am proud of you!"

" It's awfully good of you to say so, Uncle, but although I meant well, I've been more or less, of a pig-headed idiot."

" As for that, I happen to know, how you came to the rescue of that unfortunate girl, Miss Sim ; packed her off home, and paid her passage. It was you, who faced Rochfort's wife, stifled a terrible scandal, and made peace. Finally, I'm told that you saved the life of old Beamish's daughter, and nearly lost your own. Now for each of these deeds, I give you a good mark."

Mallender laughed uncomfortably.

" Your next exploit, must be to find a really nice girl —and marry her."

" I have found her."

" What ! Who ? Not Tara Beamish ? No—no."

" Miss Miller—you may have seen her ? "

" Yes, a pretty little fair girl, rides like a bird—had a narrow escape of marrying her father's old pal. That young woman has grit ; I give you my consent, and she shall have a suitable wedding present. I'm glad you did not fall in love with the other ! "

" Then you've seen the youngest Miss Beamish ? "

" Yes, in Bangalore—a beautiful creature, with wild, blue blood in her veins. I've also seen her mother—that was many years ago.—And I knew more of the girl's history, than her adopted parents ; but then, as I've told you, I live behind the scenes and hold many secrets. Well, there is no mystery about your future wife, and I wish you joy. The moon is favourable, and to-night, we shall celebrate two great events ; your visit to me, and your engagement. I shall inaugurate a big Tamasha, and my retainers will call it the feast of the full moon ; but to me, it will be the fête of Geoffrey, and his little lady ! Now, my boy, this has been a trying interview ; I know," and his voice broke, " that you feel for me ; but you'd better go now, and come again—I'm rather played out. I know I need not ask you, to keep my secret," again his voice failed, and he sat down, and struck a little hand bell. Instantly the door opened,

and the Coorg Princess appeared beckoning from the threshold.

" It has been an amazing exertion," she said as she and Geoffrey stood together in the verandah, " I'm thankful it is over."

" Yes," assented her companion, " so am I."

" He likes you so much, you have been such a great interest to him, and made him so proud and happy, for you have always been an honourable gentleman. We heard of you up in Coorg, my country, and in beautiful Mysore. I am your Aunt Alida."

Mallender bowed assent, then as he looked into her face, stirred by an inexplicable impulse, he stooped, and lifted her hand to his lips. Why not? She was his Uncle's wife, and she held herself like royalty. For a moment, she surveyed him earnestly with her burning black eyes, noting as she did so, that the young man was woefully thin; his cheeks were sunken, his clothes worn, and almost shabby. Undoubtedly, he had tasted both sickness and poverty.

" You have had a hard time," she murmured gently, " but if one leaves the beaten road,—one has to pay!"

As Geoffrey gazed into her worn but beautiful face, he realised with a pang, that this low-voiced Aunt, who had abandoned a beaten road,—had paid, heavily.

" You will come again," she urged, " we will arrange with Brown and Brown; they forward letters; the motor waits to take you wherever you please. Good-bye!" and turning towards the drawing-room, she waved him farewell.

CHAPTER XXXII

His Aunt's offer of the splendid Panhard was not accepted by Geoffrey; he preferred to depart on foot, realising that after his recent experience, he must get away alone, into some quiet retreat, there to steady his mind, and nerves. As he descended the steps, even in the dim ill-lighted premises, he received the impression

of an atmosphere of wealth, extravagance, and a certain amount of slackness, secrecy, and state ; moreover an establishment crowded with retainers. The servants' liveries were gorgeous, the massive ill-trimmed hanging lamps, of beaten silver, splendid Persian rugs were carelessly strewn on the flagged portico, and that curious smell, beyond analysis, that belongs to the East hung in the air. From the rear, came the bitter pungent odour of wood fires, cooking the evening meal, the cries of children, the shrill whinny of horses. What, Mallender asked himself, was *he* doing in this native *milieu ?* He seemed to be under some spell of unreality ! Still walking as in a dream, he passed through a group of salaaming peons, into the dark overgrown avenue. There he encountered many vague stealthy figures, going or coming, and was presently overtaken by three men ; mounted Sowars, on fine horses, who clattered by, in haste,—evidently bound on some important errand. Arrived once more at the shabby entrance he halted, and looked about, standing out of the traffic, under the shade of a great tamarind tree. As yet, he could not bring himself to face his next door relatives, or enter their well-ordered, well-illuminated English home ; the contrast was so sharp between the household of his Uncle, and his cousin—that even to think of it made him flinch.

For nearly an hour, he slowly paced the dusty road ; enclosed within high walls which lay between two entrances ; where one, his nearest relative lived, cut off from his own people, surrounded by mystery and natives ; whilst the other, great garden house, was no doubt as usual, overflowing with gay, appreciative guests, the cream of Madras society.

As he strolled along, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the ground, he was haunted by the face of his Uncle ; that awful mutilated countenance, with its jagged mouth, and wild bare eyeballs ; he shuddered more than once, that warm still evening, and tried to thrust the hideous memory from his mental vision.

Had such a fate overtaken him, how would he have borne it? He could not, would not, survive—no, even Barbie should not prevail. He endeavoured to put himself into his Uncle's place,—as a young man of his own age and profession, full of life, energy and expectation, suddenly shut out from his kindred, friends, and nation. Left alone, to struggle as best he might, with an absolutely hopeless future; abandoned to an existence of isolation and pretence. Why, why, should fate exact through years of misery, such remorseless punishment, for *one* folly?

Undoubtedly Alida represented some mitigation of the sentence; but a woman of another race and outlook. No doubt, she had been an angel of mercy, yet could even Alida replace a wasted youth?—a lost world?

Those first years must have represented the torment of Hades! they made Mallender think of quivering flesh, and a fiery furnace, of a blind lark in a tiny cage, of a starving old thoroughbred in a cheap coal cart.

What could *he* do to relieve a miserable existence? Yet if his Uncle were to be believed, he had already—if unconsciously—contributed a certain amount of interest and amusement to brighten some dark days. Doubtless sensibilities become deadened by time—for to a man of eight-and-twenty, thirty years seem an age;—perhaps his Uncle was right to stick to India, and a disguise, since Mallender of the Blue Hussars could never reclaim his former identity. It was close on eight o'clock, when Geoffrey at last gathered his forces together, and turned towards Hooper's Gardens. Here was a wide trim enclosure, guiltless of jungle, cattle, or even goats, an admirably kept well-lighted "Europe" establishment, from whence came the faint sounds of a piano, and a woman's voice.

Under the portico, the stout and stately butler received the visitor with a beaming countenance; possibly this was an indication of gratitude for past generosity—possibly, merely a token of welcome and

good-will. This particular young man was well spoken of in the go-downs.

Mallender ran up the steps, into the familiar verandah, and immediately came face to face with Nancy Brander in evening dress.

"Geoffrey!" she exclaimed, lifting her hands in astonishment. "Oh, my dear boy, how thankful I am to see you again!"

"The same to you," he answered gravely.

"We have been in *such* misery about you. When Fred saw that notice in the papers, he was utterly crushed; he blames himself for everything—for allowing you, a mere innocent, to go off alone. He says he should never have let you out of his sight,—even if he had to accompany you, and take *Fanny!* Where have you come from?"

"A coffee estate in Mysore. I'm all right now. I suppose the house is crammed as usual?"

"No, indeed, we are alone. Fan and Fred are in no spirits for company, they wired for me, and I arrived two days ago. Tom says I live here; but on this occasion, my visit lies at your door!"

"Nancy, Nan!" came a voice from within, "who are you talking to out there? Why don't you bring them in?"

"I must break it gently," she whispered. "Shall I go first, and prepare them?"

"Do, do," he urged, and stood aside, as she swept into the drawing-room.

Freddy was sitting near a lamp, pince-nez on nose, holding a paper in a limp hand. Fan was knitting with an abstracted air. They looked up when Nancy entered.

"My dear people, I bring you good news," she proclaimed, "very good news! Geoffrey is all right—he is coming!" They had both risen to their feet, when she added, "He is here!"

Knitting and paper were hastily discarded, as the prodigal nephew followed his herald into the drawing-room. His welcome was rapturous; what a scene for the stage! Freddy nearly dragged his arm off. Fanny

sobbed and shed happy tears, but the many things she would have uttered, choked in her throat.

"A nice fright you gave us, my boy!" said his cousin blowing his nose, "that note in the *Royàpetta Star*—you see, we had not had news for months—my fault! my fault! and when I saw this, I telegraphed off to General Beamish, but got no reply; though I wired three times, answer prepaid; then I tried the postmaster, and he said you were dead."

"He mixed us up," said Geoffrey, "General Beamish is dead,—he died a month ago."

"Yes, so we heard to-day, and that you had been taken away somewhere."

"You are all right again, are you, Geoffrey?" asked Fanny, as she scanned him critically. She, like her next door neighbour, the Coorg Princess, noticed that he looked thin, haggard, and shabby, in comparison to the Geoffrey of old days.

"You want feeding up, that I can see," she remarked with emphasis, "eggs and milk,—and early hours."

"There's dinner," exclaimed her husband, "come along with me, Geoffrey, and wash your hands in my room; your own will be ready in a brace of shakes. Where's your luggage?"

"I've very little, but that's at the station, most of my kit is still here."

"That's all right. Anthony can get it out, and unpack."

"Oh, I did not bring him down with me, but I'll wire for him to-morrow."

(He had left Anthony at Kartairi by the advice of Mrs. Bourne, who said:

"I believe that you will come to the end of the mystery this time, and if so, you don't want to take the whole bazaar into your confidence. I am aware of Smiler's good qualities—but I would not trust him with a family secret, till you know all about it first.")

"I expect you are starving," said Fan to Geoffrey, as he entered, and occupied his old place.

"Yes, famishing. I had breakfast at ten o'clock at Jollapett."

"Then you must have got in at four!" said Nancy, "But why didn't you come up at once?—where have you been?" In Geoffrey's opinion this was Nancy's one shortcoming, her mental eye was extraordinarily penetrating,—she was much *too* sharp.

"I had some business to attend to. I'll tell you all about it afterwards," and the traveller glanced significantly at the eager-eyed attendants, who were as anxious to hear Captain Mallender's news, as any of the company. Why all this bobbery and trouble, and coming and going? What had he been doing? they asked one another, and there was unfortunately no Anthony to set their minds at rest.

"We are a small party," said Colonel Tallboys, "we had invited a lot of people, but we put them off."

"Any of last year's lot?"

"No, Sir William and Lady Bream are at home," said Fanny, "he has just bought a place in the country, miles from everywhere, which she loathes, poor dear! She wants a house in Mayfair, and a smart villa at Roque-Brune."

"I have made some discoveries about Lady Bream," announced Geoffrey, "she is the grand-daughter of old General Beamish, and was your schoolfellow, Fan. It, excuse me,—seems incredible!"

"Yes," replied Fred, "didn't I keep the secret well. I wonder what Bream will say, when he learns the sum-total of her age, and debts!"

"As for her debts, he may possibly hear the truth," said her schoolfellow, "but Lena is so ridiculously sensitive about her age. She likes to pass for eight-and-twenty, and would not reveal that she was forty-two last October—no, not if she were agonising on the rack!"

"Oh, well, everyone is the age she looks," said Nancy cheerily. "Our dear friends, the Wylies, who were here with you, Geoffrey, are now in Japan, the guests of an American millionaire."

"I'm not interested in the Wylies," said Mallender, "I hope I may never come across them again."

"You will—if you ever become rich, they will both be devoted to you!"

"I need hardly tell you, that I'm dying to hear all your adventures," said Fan. "We have not seen you for eight whole months."

"No, and I've lots to tell you, important news too, but I'll wait, if I may, till we are in the smoking-room, with no audience."

"Meanwhile, I am on pins and needles," said Nancy, "and my imagination is filling in the most wonderful adventures and scenes."

"I saw some wonderful scenes when I was up in Coorg, and Mysore," and the traveller proceeded to give brief descriptions of his excursions, and experiences—omitting, however, all mention of Panjeverram, as he had no desire to bring Major Rochfort's past into the supremely happy present.

"You were somewhere near Madras once," said Colonel Tallboys, "for Proudfoot saw you, several times."

"Yes, I was after, what turned out to be a mare's nest!"

"I suppose you heard in the Hills of our anxiety and enquiries, and came down at once, like the good fellow you are?"

"Ye-e-s—that is to say, I had to come anyway."

"Oh, the usual thing, I suppose, eh?" said his cousin with a sly smile.

"The usual thing," repeated Geoffrey, but instead of a smile, a momentary spasm crossed his face.

"Now do begin at once, and open the budget," urged Fanny, when they had all disposed themselves comfortably in the smoking-room, and the butler had withdrawn, bearing the empty coffee cups. Mallender had not found himself a seat, but walked about restlessly, with an unlighted cigar between his fingers. At last, he came to a standstill before Fanny, and said:

"Well, my first piece of news is, that I am going to marry Barbie Miller!"

"Barbie!" echoed Mrs. Tallboys, then after a moment's pause, "Oh, my dear boy, I am so glad, so glad!" and she rose from her chair, and embraced him.

"I would follow suit," said Nancy putting down her cigarette, "and kiss you too, but Barbie might not like it."

"I call it a very sound choice," said Colonel Tallboys, "and I congratulate you, my boy. Yes, though there's no money, and a terrible mother, Barbie is the nicest little girl I know, what hair, and what hands!"

"I never noticed her hands," said Nancy, "*I* always look at feet, she has such pretty feet!"

"Hands, on a horse's mouth."

"But," resumed Nancy, sitting very erect, "I thought——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interrupted Mallender precipitately, "that's all right now."

"Nothing like beginning, or going on, with a little aversion?"

"There was no aversion on either side. I admired Barbie from the first moment I saw her."

"So did I. I was always fond of her, she is a darling; but oh, my poor Geoffrey, have you thought of your mother-in-law?"

"No, and I am not going to think of her!"

"Is anything settled?" inquired Fanny, the matchmaker.

"Mrs. Bourne and Barbie are coming down next week, and something will be arranged then."

"They stay here, of course," promptly put in Colonel Tallboys. "Fanny, you will write at once."

Geoffrey, who had taken another turn round the room, again came to a halt, and said:

"There is something else I have to tell you." After a momentary pause, he added:

"I have found my Uncle."

"God bless me, you don't say so!" ejaculated Colonel

Tallboys, leaning both hands on the arms of his chair, and rising slowly to his feet.

"You have found him," echoed Nancy, "then Peary must hide his diminished head!"

"Where is he? Why does he conceal himself?" demanded Colonel Tallboys excitedly.

To this double-barrelled question, Geoffrey at first made no reply, then he said, "That is his secret, and one which I am bound to respect."

"There's no disgraceful element in the matter?"

"None. But please don't question me, for I can tell you nothing."

"I think it remarkably strange, that *I* am to be kept in the dark," said Colonel Tallboys speaking with a pink complexion, and rising temper. "How is he? At least I suppose you may answer *that*. Is he much changed—eh?"

"You forget that until lately I had never seen him."

"Yes, that's true. I knew him long ago! Such a smart handsome young fellow, full of go and enterprise, and very popular. Lord! *how* I admired and envied him!"

"I think I may say, that he is fairly well in health, that he will never leave India, was glad to see me, and to hear I was going to be married."

"And I am delighted that you have carried out your undertaking," added Fan, "and not had all your searching and trouble for nothing!"

"On the contrary, my trouble, as you call it, has been rewarded by a fortune; my Uncle has made Mallender over to me altogether."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" cried Freddy clapping his hands, and once more the soul of good-humour. "This is something like news! So you are actually now, as you stand there, in your shabby serge, and disgraceful 'chuklers'' boots, Mallender of Mallender, with eight thousand a year!"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"I presume Brown and Co. have arranged everything,

and made out the deeds ; if you'd like *me* to go and look into matters, you know, my dear boy, you have only to say the word and I am heartily at your service ! "

" Thank you. I believe it's all right, I've not heard any details, but I'll let you know later on how things stand."

" And so *this*, was your business in Madras, my rich young adventurer ? "

" Partly."

" What a match for Barbie ! " suddenly exclaimed Nancy, " dear little simple girl. But only think of Mrs. Miller ! " she added with a touch of light-hearted cruelty. " She will be lying in wait for you at Victoria Station—if she is not arranging the house for your reception at Mallender, with triumphal arches, and a band."

" Don't mind her, Geoffrey," said his cousin, " she is only trying to draw you. I should be sorry to think you were not able to grapple with Mother Miller."

" It is really incredible, what a change a couple of hours can make," said Fan. " This evening, I felt so utterly miserable and depressed, I would have thoroughly enjoyed a good cry ; now, only it would be too remarkable, I'd like to run out into the compound, and *sing !* We must fill up the house at once, I'll wire first thing to-morrow for Mrs. Bourne and Barbie. Nan, my dear, we shall have a right merry Christmas ! "

" Talking of singing in the compound, and a merry time," said Colonel Tallboys, who had stepped into the verandah, " I'm blessed if the old boy next door isn't sending up rockets, and fire balloons !—the best sort too !—it's worth your while to come out, all of you ! There must be some big Tamasha in his family, —probably a wedding ! "

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE wedding of Captain Mallender and Miss Barbara Miller, was one of the most popular functions of the Madras season. Scores of invitations were issued from

hospitable Hooper's Gardens, and not only was the house crammed for the occasion, but the supplementary encampment was on such a scale, that it might have been mistaken for a Durbar. Among the guests, were the three Beamishes. Tom and Jessie were commonplace enough, and appeared to be not a little bewildered by their gay surroundings, but Tara, their bridesmaid sister, created a profound sensation. Her beauty, lofty carriage, air of distinction and absolute self-possession, found hosts of admirers; these were struck dumb when they learned that this young Royal, and Imperial Highness, was merely the daughter of old Beamish, and his third wife,—an homely humble body, whose father had been an hospital dresser. The girl presented an almost ludicrous contrast to her relatives! Tom passed as a young planter, a rough diamond in his way, and a good sort: he soon made friends; but Miss Beamish, who was shy and ill-dressed, did not know what to talk about, or what to do with her hands—and grand climax, impartially distributed little pink tracts, dealing with the souls of the heathen!

Her sister, on the contrary, wore her clothes with admirable grace, and seemed not merely to find herself at ease, but to dominate the company! As people looked at Tara, a fragile aristocrat seated with nonchalant dignity in the midst of her Court, and then at Jessie, bashful and self-conscious, perched on the edge of a chair, feverishly twisting her ugly fingers, they decided that "Heredity" was an amazing factor in human life,—and enchanting Miss Tara a most remarkable "throw back."

But Mrs. Fiske, who had recently descended on Madras, put an entirely different construction on the case; one alas! that was not creditable to the virtue of Mrs. Beamish.

In his mysterious excursions through the Presidency, it was evident that Captain Mallender had picked up some strange acquaintances—this was another of Mrs. Fiske's pronouncements. On the afternoon of the

wedding, amidst the fashionable crowd in the Cathedral, were two youths, who were almost black, and an elderly European woman, conspicuous in green velveteen yellow silk gloves, and an appalling hat. Yet to the trio, the bridegroom, whilst awaiting the bride, most particularly addressed himself. What could he possibly have in common with such low people ? Here even Mrs. Fiske's lurid imagination was at fault ; and besides these undesirables, close to the entrance, and completely in the background, Mrs. Fiske was amazed to descry, two *natives !* A black-bearded man, wearing spectacles and an immense turban, and a lady who was closely veiled. Apparently, anxious to shun recognition, they were the last to arrive, and effected a stealthy departure before the Wedding March burst forth, and the bridal procession left the altar.

Barbie, who looked lovely, and wore wonderful pearls, and a lace train and veil, was given away by Colonel Tallboys, whilst Captain Byng supported his friend. There were eight charming bridesmaids, many brilliant toilettes and smart uniforms, and it was pronounced to be the prettiest and most popular wedding that had been celebrated in Madras for years.

Subsequently, the reception was held at Hooper's Gardens ; here the presents were on view ; these were numerous and varied ; from an Annamulley cane, and a bamboo tiffin basket, to a moon-shaped amulet set in brilliants, and a string of magnificent pearls.

When, a few weeks later, the happy couple sailed for home, their departure was deplored by many,—even although they had faithfully promised to return ere long.

Pending this fulfilment, Anthony had accepted service with Colonel Tallboys ; he talks much in cook-house, and pantry, of his master ? the Captain, and boasts, that before he went away, he paid in one hundred pounds for him, Anthony, to the Madras Bank. "Two thousand five hundred rupees, all for me, and my services. My master thinking plenty much of *me* therefore, fortune giving."

This as it happened was the truth; but his jealous associates comforted one another with the statement, that it was only one of Anthony's many lies!

On the day of departure, the Tallboys, accompanied by the Branders, ascended to the flat roof of Hooper's Gardens, in order to see the very last of the steamer that was bearing their relatives to England. Their eyes followed it, or rather its smoke, till it dwindled and dwindled by degrees, and as the little speck finally faded below the horizon Nancy turned, with a dramatic gesture, and addressed her companions:

"They're gone, and only think of it! just one year ago, Geoffrey came out here, on a wild-goose chase, a stranger in the land, and empty-handed,—for his allowance was cut off from the day he arrived. Behold, now, he returns, leaving crowds of Indian friends—not to mention a weeping Anthony—and carries away with him, a sword, a horse, a fortune, and a bride!"

THE END

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